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OR,
**THE SMASH-UP IN
"NO-WORLD KINGDOM."**

A Romance of the Unexplored Range.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "CENTRAL PACIFIC PAUL," "BOR-
DER BULLET," "TEXAS TARTAR," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE APACHES' STRANGE FOE.

THE smoke of a camp-fire arose lazily, but there was nothing that partook of indolence in the manner of those around the fire. They were eating with avidity, not pausing to look up or exchange a word.

In this devotion to gastronomy they were running some risk, for they were in the wild lands of the south-west border, where roving Apaches were liable to be looking for prey of the human order.

The men in camp were well armed. Their rifles were within reach; and a knife and brace of revolvers ornamented their belts. In this

"MIGHTY QUEER WHAT'S BECOME O' MY PARD," ABE MUTTERED. "REV THEM NO WORLD KINGDOM RASCALS REALLY KETCHED THE VENTURESOME EXPLORER?"

and other respects they looked capable of taking care of themselves.

The party, all told, was composed of three—two men and a dog. The men were middle-aged, stout and rough, and like hardened frontiersmen. That they were hardened to dirt, also, was painfully evident, for neither was in fit condition to scorn soap and water, though those useful articles evidently had been scorned in the past.

One of the pair was of unusually muscular frame, having long, powerful legs and great breadth of shoulders. His companion was noticeable chiefly on account of a melancholy visual expression.

The broad-shouldered man threw away a well-picked bone.

"I'm done!" he declared. "Ef thar is any one thing which I ain't, it's a hog. Others may eat an' gorge their inner tabernacle, but them ain't my ways. Moderation is my motto, an' I'll stick to it ef the Paches hev me at the stake for steak! Wah! wah! a full stomach makes man a cherub. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!" was the terse reply.

"I'm a wanderer o' many years experience. My foot has trod ev'ry plain, valley an' pass from Hudson Bay ter the Rio Grande, from Golden Gate ter the Mississip. I ain't no bragger, but men know me wal wharsumdever I go. Let me enter a settlement never so small, an' when the small boys ax who I be, dozens is ready ter reply: 'That's Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas!' They all know me. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!" agreed the melancholy-faced man.

"Ask who's the champion shooter, fighter, runner, wrestler, rider an' scout o' the West, an' people rise up an' say, 'Alkali Abe!' I ain't no bragger, but the truth should be spoke at all times. I advertise ter do it, an' what I advertise, I do. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"Of course it is; all I say is, I'm always right, fur I don't brag. Show me a man who brags, an' I'll show you a chap minus sand. So you're done, Seth Mason? So be I; so is Lazarus."

He directed a glance toward the dog. It was a homely animal which carried an air of guilt as a lion does courage. Modesty or misfortune sat upon Lazarus and crushed him.

Alkali Abe yawned and walked a few steps away, to where he could get a view of the surrounding country. They were on the top of a ridge, in a region where there might not be another human being in fifty miles, or where Indians or outlaws might possibly come.

The chances were against any one else being there, for it was three days' journey to the nearest town, and that was only a collection of shanties.

In fact they were remote from human habitations, far advanced in a wild, unknown locality, and it would not have surprised them to know that no white man had ever been there before them.

Alkali Abe's first look out over the plain brought an exclamation of surprise from him.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" he ejaculated.

His comrade remained unmoved.

"Seth Mason, will yer come hyar?" the Game Chicken demanded.

Then Seth condescended to oblige Abe, and, standing beside him, looked and saw what had so aroused Abe.

"A white man an' a— A What-is-it? I reckon, though it may insult the critter I name," added the man from Texas.

On the plain, well below and beyond them, two ridden horses were moving leisurely. One rider presented no unusual feature, for he was, as Abe had said, a white man—that and nothing more.

But he on the second horse was of very different appearance. He was without shape, looking as broad as he was long, and his dress was of gaudy hues. Red and white predominated, and the material seemed to be more fit for a woman's costume. Light of fabric and eccentric of cut, it rose, fell and swayed in the wind like a balloon in convulsions.

Neither hat nor hair was visible on his head; its top was white.

"It's an abnormal imp!" declared Alkali Abe, in amazement. "Ef they grow sech in these hills, I'm off fur civilization. It's all right ter explore wild places when you find no worse than rocks an' trees, 'Paches an' tarantulas, but, jabberin' jaguars! a country that turns out nondescriptimps ain't no place fur the Game Chicken from Texas. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

Usually, Seth's favorite reply was wholly mechanical and stoical, but there was some trace of life in it now.

He was stirred out of his apathy by a sight so strange and ludicrous.

The two riders were going at an easy pace, but their manner indicated lack of confidence. They looked around frequently, eying the rocky spurs which were on both sides of them as if they expected to see an enemy appear.

"Greenhorns in the wilds," muttered the Game Chicken, absently, losing sight for a moment of

the ridiculous. "They expect fur ter be tackled by some enemy. Probably it's Injuns. Wal, wal, a greenhorn may properly take a ticklin' in his skulpef he's abroad hyar— Hullo! Reds, by the jabberin' jaguars o' Jigtown!"

He broke off suddenly as his keen gaze detected horsemen between two of the rocky spurs on the further side of the narrow plain. They were in a group, and all were Indians.

"Say," pursued Abe, "them children of Israel will git done up. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

The Game Chicken sprang upon a higher rock, anxious to shout an alarm and save the two riders from going straight into the Apaches' power, but he was too late.

There was a sudden movement among the red-men, and then they came dashing out of the ravine in a body, urging their horses on and making straight for the two riders.

Alkali Abe knew what that portended. At that particular time, when one met an Apache Indian there was no question of how they were to meet. The Western Bedouin's hand was against the white men, one and all, and no chance for slaughter was neglected. For a long while the tribe had been on the rampage, and their present intentions were not open to question.

Their intended prey were not long in seeing the danger, and they turned their horses and fled in the direction from which they had come, urging their horses as fast as possible.

"But they can't escape!" muttered Alkali Abe; "the 'Paches gain ev'ry foot. Yas, yas; they do gain fast, an' we shall see them cut ter bits right afore our eyes. It's tough, Seth Mason; it's mighty tough—an' we standin' here as useless as the rock under our feet. Jabberin' jaguars! don't I wish they was whar we could wade in!"

He beat a tattoo on his rifle-barrel, eager for the fray. With all of his boastful qualities he was as brave as man could be, and the fact that the odds were so greatly against them would not have deterred him from attacking the Apaches, if such a thing had been possible.

It was not possible, and he saw the Indians gain foot by foot, while his own impotency stirred him up as he was rarely stirred.

"Shut yer eyes, Seth Mason!" he continued.

"It'll soon be over."

It was over quickly, but not as he had expected. Just when the Apaches' moment of triumph seemed at hand there was a new diversion as unexpected as it was remarkable.

Abe heard a sound which was entirely new to him, and, raising his eyes to discover the cause, he saw on the plain, beyond the horsemen, a strange and gigantic animal which was rushing toward the Apaches at great speed.

The Game Chicken stared in dumfounded amazement.

"What is it?" he gasped; "what is it, Seth Mason?"

His comrade made no reply, but Abe's face suddenly cleared.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" he ejaculated, "it's an elephant!—an elephant in this wild land! Jabber—"

He ceased; utter bewilderment caused his favorite exclamation to die away on his tongue.

As he was given time to look further he made a second discovery not less remarkable than the first.

Upon the elephant's back was a rider, and the rider was a woman!

The big scout shook his head in a hopeless way, as if he was unable to believe what he saw, but not for a moment did he turn his gaze from the thrillingly interesting scene.

The elephant appeared to be in a rage. Rushing toward the Apaches he trumpeted loudly, and flourished his trunk in air.

There could be but one result of this. Both the Apaches and their horses fell into a panic; neither had seen such an animal before, and it was hard to tell whether rider or horse felt the most terror. The one wheeled and fled, and the other not only allowed him to go, but urged on his flight.

Their own coveted prey had no place in their minds, then.

But escape was out of the question. The elephant had been almost upon them before they had turned, and his speed was remarkable. Despite the mountain of flesh he carried he gained at every step, and was soon up with the rearmost Indian. A moment more and the red warrior was plucked from his seat by the coil of the elephant's trunk, and buried to the ground with stunning force.

Then yells of terror arose from the remaining Apaches, and they beat their horses in a frantic attempt to urge on the already-maddened steeds.

CHAPTER II.

SINGULAR GUESTS AT THE CAMP-FIRE.

"JABBERIN' jaguars!" exclaimed Alkali Abe, "I've roved the West fur ten generations, but I never seen the like on't. Say, Seth Mason, ain't it merak'lous?"

"Kerreck!" Seth agreed.

"How did that elephant ever get hyar? Why, I'd as soon look ter see a hippobitamus! Hi! he

placks off another red an' smashes him on the arth! Amazin'! Ain't it, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"Why, the woman on his back is young an' pooty—a parfict beauty! An'—oh! oh! Seth Mason, she's as cool as an iceberg! seems ter give the elephant his own way, but ter be reconciled ter things. She's used ter ridin' him, she is; fur she does it like a dandy. Hurrah fur the Elephant Queen! But, oh! Seth Mason, ain't them reds rattled!"

The Game Chicken's mood had changed. When he saw the tables so neatly turned upon the Apaches it dissipated his fears, and he was himself again. After the last words he laughed aloud, and the rocks seemed to take up the hearty expression of mirth and kept him company.

But the scene on the plain was fast drawing to a close, as far as the bordermen were concerned as spectators. The fleet horses of the Apaches were making a noble race, and though the elephant kept close at their heels and continued to trumpet its rage, Abe and his comrade were not destined to see any more casualties.

The Indians realized that their one hope was in getting to the western ridge, and they turned around the spur and made for the place of safety. This change of course shut them out from the bordermen's view.

Alkali Abe looked for the riders he had first seen; both had dissappeared.

Then he turned to Seth.

"I'm a tough ol' fowl o' many years' experience. Border life an' me are twins, an' I've eaten with it from the Mississip ter whar the Pacific washes old Cal's golden sands; but I tell ye fair I never seen sech strange spetterkuls afore as them. First we observe a critter on hoss-back which is like a rainbow humped up in a bunch; an' then we see an elephant. An elephant in the far Southwest, whar even white men are skeerce as hen's teeth! Strange, ain't it, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"What do ye make of it?"

The taciturn Seth was confronted with a question which could not be answered with his favorite word, but he found a reply equally brief:

"Dunno!"

"Course ye don't! Who does? Who could? I'm about as sprightly as they make 'em, but I admit that this downs me. I'm all at sea; I'm beat; I'm dead-puzzled. I cave!"

The speaker sat down and assumed the air of a demoralized man, letting his head, arms and legs hang as if they were helpless and lifeless. Seth remained stoical and silent, but chewed with great zeal.

He was as celebrated for his use of tobacco as for his taciturnity. He never smoked, but a huge chew was always in his mouth; he rolled it almost constantly, and rarely expectorated without taking deliberate aim at something, and what he aimed at, thus, he generally hit.

After sitting for several minutes the big borderman arose.

"I'm thinkin' we may as wal take a ride, Seth Mason. I want ter see the actors in the late scrape. I can't look at a young an' beautiful gal, a-ridin' an elephant in a land whar no house stands within a hund'ud mile of it; whar no wagon ever rolled a wheel; whar Nature is s'posed ter play a lone hand, an' not be powerful gashed up in my mind. Ter hoss, Seth Mason! How's that?"

"Kerreck!"

"Course 'tis; what I says always is korreck. Come on!"

He led the way with long steps. A short distance from the camp their horses had been left to graze in a suitable place. After saddling and bridling them the scouts rode away, followed by the dog.

They descended to the plain and rode toward the western range. It was nothing to them that hostile Apaches were there; they had fought the red warriors before, and expected to fight them many times in the future.

Alkali Abe led the way directly along the trail of the Indians. On entering the recess wherein they had disappeared he found that it was more than a recess; it extended through the range, which was low and broken. When the opposite side was reached, there was still no sign of Indians, elephant, or Elephant Queen, as Abe had poetically named the unknown girl. The country beyond was wild and erratic. Numerous little hills, wooded and rocky, prevented any extensive view, and the Game Chicken reined in his horse.

"Shall we, or shall we not?" he inquired. "They may be ten mile away now; they sartinly be ef they kept up their pace. Ef we foller, we must take the trail. Is it worth while, Seth Mason?"

"Dunno!"

"The gal may need help."

Seth said nothing.

"It's more likely that the reds need help, I reckon, but they won't git it from us. How's that?"

"Kerreck!"

Abe meditated, and finally decided not to be too much bent upon interference. If the girl

was not able to take care of herself, she ought not to have led a charge upon the Apaches.

"She must be a supernat'ral bein'," Abe decided. "Gals don't belong here, nohow, an' a gal who rides an elephant ain't accordin' ter natur'. Seth Mason, we'd better leave her severely alone."

"Kerreck!"

The Game Chicken tried to hold to his resolution, but curiosity was too strong to be resisted. He finally led the way out among the small peaks, keeping a sharp watch for the red enemy, and longing more than he would admit to see the Elephant Queen again.

He saw nothing of any human being, and, after an aimless ride, the scouts retraced their steps. There lay the trail of the Apaches, but, though he looked at it longingly, Abe would not follow it.

Instead, he and Seth rode toward the north, and finally encamped at a point two miles away from the scene of the recent adventures. Knowledge of the presence of Apaches led to the choosing of a camp with care, but Abe was in ill-humor.

As time went on he was more impressed with the idea that he ought to have followed the unknown girl; and this made him irritable.

Supper was cooked at twilight by a small fire, which was extinguished immediately after, and the bordermen prepared to eat.

"But I ain't got no appetite," grumbled the Game Chicken. "I'm nat'rally delikit, an', ter-night, I couldn't eat five pound o' meat ef I was paid big money for it. Seth Mason, you may lose yer pardner, yet: I'm gettin' inter a decline, an' eatin' is a vanity an' vexation o' speerit!"

While speaking thus the eccentric scout had begun to chew and swallow at a rate which bespoke a tremendous appetite but it may be that he believed all he had said.

Certainly, his feast was interrupted, and in a peculiar way.

Lazarus uttered a growl, the Game Chicken looked up, and then his food dropped from his hands. He stared in blank wonder, and not without cause—a young and beautiful woman was advancing.

She came calmly into the camp, and as calmly addressed Alkali Abe:

"May I have some supper?"

"Have—some—su-su-supper?" he blankly, stammeringly repeated.

"That was my request."

He drew a long breath.

"So you're alive?"

"I am, or I should need no supper."

"Whar's the elephant?"

"Where is— Excuse me; I did not understand."

"Whar's the elephant?"

"I am at loss to know what you mean."

"Did he do up the 'Paches?"

"You talk in riddles, so I will change the subject and once more ask if I can have supper here."

"Why, sartain! Hyar, Seth Mason, bustle around. Set out the best our cupboard can boast on. Bring out the gold dishes, wines, fruits an' tooth-picks—which is my way o' namin' bread an' meat, miss. That's all we hev ter eat, but you're welcome. 'Rastle around, Seth Mason, an' don't be afeerd o' breakin' yer delikit legs. You kin tie 'em up ef they crack—"

"Is the invitation open to an acquaintance of mine?" the girl interrupted.

"Sartain! Bring her on! Toddle in all the gals you kin, fur we are hankerin' fur refined company— Oh! it ain't a gal!"

The new-comer had turned and made a gesture, and a man advanced swiftly out of the gloom.

Abe could see his face but faintly in the unfavorable light, but was not disposed to give any great good will to one who came to share the smiles of their new friend with them—though, for that matter, she had not shown any inclination to smile thus far.

But the latest arrival caught Abe's hand in a warm way.

"My dear sir, allow me to thank you for this hospitality!" he exclaimed. "Cast away in this place as we are, lost in the wilds, beset by savage Indians and perhaps, other foes—"

"Where's the funny chap?" Abe interrupted.

"Who?"

"The shapeless critter in seven-colored gowns."

"I am ignorant of your meaning."

"Wal, did the elephant smash 'em?"

"Smash whom? What elephant?"

"Oh! I seen you; don't dodge!"

"I don't think you ever saw us before."

"Ain't she the one who rid the elephant?"

"If you are serious in your preposterous questions, I'll say that we know nothing about an elephant; have not seen one in years."

Abe turned slowly to his partner.

"Another one, Seth Mason! another gal in a place I'd a' sworn had never seen a white woman. Jabberin' jaguars! hev we run onto a city hyar?"

"However that may be, we are castaways in this wilderness of rocks and solitude," explained the unknown man. "Our story you shall hear

later; for now, let it suffice that we are introduced. This lady is Miss Eudora Redmoor; my name is Allison Blake."

"Not the Elephant Queen, eh?"

"Excuse me, but I see your friend has our supper. Can we eat?"

"Ef you hev teeth?"

The Game Chicken spoke in a surly tone. He was disappointed not to have met the fair rider of the elephant, and, moreover, Mr. Allison Blake did not impress him favorably. Despite his many eccentricities, Abe was usually a hospitable man, and he would not have been less on this occasion if he had not taken a dislike to Blake.

The new-comers did not wait for a more amiable invitation, but attacked the eatables set before them by Seth with zeal.

Alkali Abe threw a quantity of light fuel upon the fading coals, making a small but bright blaze.

"Isn't that reckless?" asked Blake.

"Why?"

"Miss Redmoor and I have believed that Apaches were about. If they are not, we have done a good deal of dodging in vain."

"They be about."

Abe answered unconcernedly, but did not extinguish the fire. On the contrary, he threw on more fuel, taking reckless pleasure in the desire to alarm his guests; but, if he succeeded, there was no evidence to that effect. Both ate calmly.

The borderman's primary object had been to get a good view of the strangers, and he had ample opportunity.

Allison Blake looked to be thirty-five years old. He was tall and well-formed, though not particularly muscular. He had fair hair, and a huge blonde mustache. When Abe had looked at him critically he liked him less than ever, yet Blake was a well-dressed, gentlemanly-appearing man. There was nothing in his garments or manner to indicate that he was a plainsman, yet there was something about him which Abe recognized as a barrier to feelings of contempt, though he could not analyze the element.

"Really, it was that reserved power which is acquired by the man of the world; the man who has seen life in all its forms."

Eudora Redmoor was a young woman who owed much good will to Nature. She had a fine form and handsome face, but there was enough coldness in the latter to have repelled Abe had he not seen more than coldness there.

He could not have analyzed the impression, yet he realized the idea that she had seen great and long-continued suffering, and that, while she sunk under it in a measure, she still had the resolution to bear up with a kind of dogged hopelessness.

The Game Chicken admired pluck, and a good heart beat under his rough exterior.

He decided to sympathize with Miss Redmoor until convinced that sympathy there would be thrown away.

But how came the couple in those hills that knew neither law, human dwellings nor white residents?—where even the red wandering Indians rarely come?

It was a great puzzle.

The couple finished supper, and the man turned to Alkali Abe.

CHAPTER III.

SUSPICIOUS COMPANIONS.

"We owe you many thanks," observed Allison Blake, in a friendly way. "We were hungry and without food, and I dared not fire at any game, knowing that the Indians were near. Until we chanced upon you, it looked like a supperless night, with a bed among the rocks."

"Hotels are skeerce, hyar," Abe answered.

"They are, indeed."

The Game Chicken was silent, and Blake continued:

"Do you anticipate attack?"

"Who from?"

"The Apaches."

"Ef they want ter attack, they kin. We don't keer fur the miser'ble critters. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!" replied the taciturn man.

"Yet, their numbers would be superior to yours," pursued Blake.

"That's nuthin'."

"Will you allow us to remain here with you?"

"Nuthin' simpler."

It was not a warm consent, and Allison Blake looked annoyed, but he could do no more than to make the best of the matter.

"I will explain in as few words as possible how Miss Redmoor and I chanced to be here. I need hardly say that we did not come to this remote place willingly."

"It's a good place," asserted Abe, stubbornly.

"It may be for you, but we don't like it. We left the town of Waudelia with a camping-party and came to the edge of the hills. We thought we were in a safe locality, but the Apaches attacked the camp. Miss Redmoor and I chanced to be out riding, and we escaped."

"What became of our companions I don't

know, but we, pursued by the Indians, rode at full speed in the only direction open to us. Unfortunately, the aforesaid course took us deeper and deeper into this region, and when we finally shook off the Apaches we were hopelessly lost."

"You will remember that Thursday and Friday were very cloudy. On those days we could not locate the sun, and I suspect that, in my efforts to get out of the hills, I only went deeper into them."

"Yesterday, to cap the climax of our misfortunes, our horses wandered away and were lost, so we are now utterly helpless."

"That is the story, in brief, for I can do no good by dwelling upon our sufferings."

Allison concluded, and Abe eagerly asked:

"Was one o' yer feller-campers a queer little, round chap, in a woman's gown o' many colors, an' a white, bald head?"

"No."

"But thar was an elephant?"

"No."

The Game Chicken sighed heavily. He was deeply interested in the "little, round chap" and the elephant, and correspondingly grieved at not being able to get news of them.

"Perhaps," added Blake, after a pause, "you can tell us where we are?"

"You are nowhar! This region ain't in no town, county, State nor country; it's Nature's ground, whar she dumped in all the matter she had left over after the world was made. It is five thousand miles away from anywhar, an' no human bein' knows it better than you do, unless it's a few jabberin' 'Paches."

"That is discouraging."

"A heap!"

"But how are we to get out?"

Alkali Abe was about to make answer in the single word, "Fly!" but his gaze strayed to Eudora and his heart softened. Giving no visible held to the conversation, she was gazing at the again-dying coals with an air of hopeless resignation.

The borderman's mood changed at once.

"Whar do ye want ter go?" he asked. "Back ter yer old quarters?"

For a second Blake hesitated.

"Yes," he then replied.

"Then Seth Mason an' I'll guide ye. We are only out ter look this wild region over, an' we won't see a woman left in danger; 'tain't our way. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"We thank you warmly, and will accept your kind offer. I think you did not mention your name?"

"I was started off in the race o' life as Abraham Partridge. Jabberin' jaguars! how funny them words sound! Ain't heerd either on 'em fur years. Don't you speak 'em! Wal, I'm Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas, scout, trailer, Injun-fighter, guide, runner, wrestler, jumper an' dead-shot. I ain't no bragger, but I'm a wild zebra with more legs nor a barrer has got teeth. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"So 'tis; he vouches to it. An' he's a chap commonly called Silent Seth, 'cause he's always makin' a good 'eal o' talk."

There was a merry twinkle in Abe's eyes, but Seth did not resent the latest libel. The silent man masticated his tobacco with zeal, and then made a dead shot at the end of Lazarus's tail.

Blake suggested that it would be policy to retire at an early hour, so, after sending Seth to make sure that no Indians were near, Abe selected a suitable spot and prepared as good sleeping-places as possible.

He had an eye upon his guests while thus occupied, and soon saw Blake approach Eudora. She was absorbed in thought, and did not notice him until he placed his hand upon her shoulder.

Then she shrunk from the touch as if it were contamination, and moved a little away from him.

A disagreeable smile passed over his face, and he spoke to her for some time in a voice too low for Abe to hear. He approached, not having any scruples against listening, but the alert Mr. Blake raised his voice and began to speak on trivial subjects.

Baffled, the borderman retreated, and the secret conversation was resumed.

Abe watched jealously and suspiciously. In Eudora's every look and motion he found fresh confirmation of the idea that Blake was repulsive to her. He seemed to be urging some point upon her, while she listened with cold attention.

Evidently, she did not fear him.

"A queer cargo!" the Game Chicken thought, as he worked. "I don't b'lieve a word o' his explanation of how they got hyar, an' it's a great conundrum ter grapple with. What's the bond between them? I don't see no harm in her, though she ain't so womanly as might be. But she hates that snake, an' I honor her for it!"

Silent Seth returned.

"How's the lay o' the land?" Abe asked.

"Kerreck!"

"That's good; we don't want no 'Paches in ourn. I hope they ain't ketched the little round man in bright colors, neither."

Clearly, the scout had conceived a sort of mystic admiration for the queer rider, which was as unexplainable as it was ever-present. Abe was a practical man, yet neither the Elephant Queen nor the elephant moved him as much as the eccentrically-clad person.

His border instincts were all aroused, and he was reluctant to see the whole camp succumb to slumber. True, Lazarus was one of the best of guards, and his master had placed trusts of all kinds in his sagacity in the past, but recent events had been so out of the ordinary course that the big frontiersman was uneasy.

When all the others had retired he sat by the fire in a meditative, uncertain mood.

The coals still made some light, and he could see the forms of each of his companions, but he would rather have seen clearly into the past of his guests, and into the mystery of the strangers first discovered.

Lazarus had fallen asleep, but his alertness was never absent. Suddenly he came to his feet, and a low, warning growl passed his lips.

His face was toward the left, and a human form became visible there.

Abe's rifle clicked, but a calm voice greeted the hostile demonstration:

"Pray save your powder, friend, for I am not worth bringing down!"

And the speaker advanced fearlessly to the fire and stood facing the Game Chicken. The unknown was reckless, and he must have known it. They were in a region where every one must be regarded as an enemy unless proved innocent, and to advance so boldly into a sleeping camp was to risk getting a bullet in the way of reception.

Abe glared aggressively upon the new-comer. "Be seated!" added the unknown.

"Who in jabberin' jaguars be you?" the scout demanded.

"A lone traveler, and a white man like yourself."

"What's that ter me?"

"Would you prefer to see an Apache?"

"It might be better fur me."

"Rest easy; I am not of Gorgon blood."

"I didn't ask fur yer pedigree," growled the Game Chicken. "What are ye doin' hyar?"

"Looking for human companionship."

"Did you get my invitation?"

"I did not, but I presumed that one honest man need not fear another. Restrain your ill-will, my good sir, and let us have peace. I am neither an Apache nor an outlaw. Being a lone white man, I seek the company of my kind. Am I welcome or unwelcome?"

Abe turned and threw a handful of fuel upon the coals. He wanted to see the new claimant to his hospitality. Thus far, he was not unfavorably impressed. The stranger's manner pleased him, and he was not inclined to repulse a desirable person, but fair words were not always based upon fair intentions; he wanted to see the applicant distinctly.

"The fire blazed up, and he had his wish.

He beheld a man of less than thirty years, and of pleasing appearance. Somewhat above the average height, he had an athletic form and manly face. His dress was that of a veteran borderman, and he carried a rifle with the ease born of experience.

"Shall I pass?" he inquired, calmly, when he had received a critical survey.

"We'll see. Who be you?"

"My name is Scatter-shot."

"Eh?"

"Scatter-shot!"

"You claim that fur a name?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"No 'arthly reason, stranger. In this land 'most everybody has a name which his own mother wouldn't know him by, but yours is wounded funny. Scatter-shot! Jabberin' jaguars!"

"I see nothing peculiar about it."

"Nor me. More common than Jones, Brown or White, yet an artom less numerous than Smith. Let me salute ye, Mr. Scatter-shot! You scattered my wits for awhile, but I'm in the saddle ag'in. My name is Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken from Texas; a steer with antlers a rod long with nary a crook, and a hoss with a mane bigger nor Niagara Falls. These are my frien's."

Silent Seth and Allison Blake had turned out to look at the new-comer, and were referred to thus.

CHAPTER IV.

ABE ACTS THE LISTENER.

SCATTER-SHOT did not seem to see anything absurd in Abe's speech. He bowed gravely.

"I am glad to meet a man so well recommended. Besides, I've heard of you before."

"Who from?"

"A certain Gila Griff."

"You don't say so! He's an ol' chum o' mine. So you knowed him?"

"Yes."

"His frien's are mine. Set you down, Scatter-shot, an' be at home. Eat hearty an' grow fat! Seth Mason, ante up bread, b'ar an' beef—"

"Thank you, but I've eaten; I require nothing. Like you, frontiersman, I am amply able to care for myself; I am far from new to the regions

unknown to civilization. As to my presence here, I've been traveling through Apache-land for the pleasure of it. Seeing your camp, I ventured to drop in on you."

Scatter-shot was one of the coolest men to be imagined, and seemed one who would glide into any situation of life and feel at home. His composure, free as it was from forwardness, was very impressive to Abe, whose good opinion increased momentarily.

But the new-comer, though so much at ease and so unobtrusive, did not fail to use his eyes freely. He studied the faces of Abe, Seth and Blake as much as the light would allow, and sent more than one inquisitive glance toward the place where Eudora slumbered.

Blake noticed this, and a scowl gradually settled upon his face, but he did not venture any comments; he knew that his own position in the camp was not such as to justify belligerent action on his part.

Abe, on the contrary, showered every attention upon Scatter-shot. In fact, his extreme friendliness appeared overdone, but he was a man who had confidence in his impressions of others, and did not hesitate to follow them.

In the conversation which followed, Scatter-shot stated that his chief purpose in being among the hills was idle interest in Nature, but that he was also an explorer and surveyor, and was to make a report, later, of the geological and topographical features of the vicinity to Government officers.

This was a peaceable occupation, surely, but Allison Blake noticed that the stranger's gaze still wandered toward the place where Eudora lay, and he grew more and more suspicious and angry.

The recess allotted to the girl was so dark that it could not be told whether she was awake, but no movement of the blankets betrayed attention to affairs in the camp.

Blake's suspense was ended in a measure when all decided to lie down. This they did, and silence prevailed in the camp. The strange collection forgot their varied purposes, doubts and fears; all slept.

It was considerable later when Alkali Abe awoke. He had ears trained to the finest point, as certain persons might have discovered if they had been able to watch him.

First of all he saw Lazarus lying with head erect, but the dog's manner was one of composure.

This was not all, however.

A tall form was in motion in the camp, and Abe easily recognized it as Scatter-shot's.

A wave of suspicion rolled over the borderman, but he made no precipitate motion. He saw the self-styled surveyor approach the recess where Eudora lay; saw the girl rise to a sitting position. She manifested no surprise. Words passed between her and Scatter-shot, and then she rose and left the camp with him.

Abe was excited, and he resolved to follow them; more, he was determined to listen while they talked. No fine sense of honor stood in his way, and he felt that he had a right to know something about those who had asked his protection.

Not far had the two gone before Abe was gliding after them like a shadow. The pursuit was short; they stopped as soon as they were out of hearing of the camp.

The shadower listened attentively, eagerly.

"You seemed prepared to see me," observed Scatter-shot, reopening the conversation.

"I saw you when you came into the camp,"

Eudora answered, quietly.

"And I came because you were here."

"How did you know that?"

"I had seen you with—him!"

The last word was peculiarly spoken, and did not indicate any great amount of respect or good will for Allison Blake.

"You were near then?" continued Eudora.

"Watching you and him."

"Was that manly?"

"Your reprimand is not necessary, though natural. All I wanted was to learn just how you and he were situated, one toward the other—"

"Did you learn?"

"No."

"Give it up as a worthless task!"

"Why?"

"I am not worth your trouble."

"You ought to know, but I had to be convinced, first, that you were a willing companion of that knave. When I knew that you were I felt easier in my mind. I would not have seen you restrained of your liberty."

The girl sighed deeply.

"What is liberty?" she demanded.

"To me it is a vast deal."

"It is worthless to me; all things are worthless."

"Is the voice of conscience speaking now?"

"I can bear your insinuations calmly; I can bear all things. Could I meet worse than I have met already?"

"You are not the only sufferer."

"I know, I know; and God is my judge that I feel deeply for you!"

These words were spoken with sudden passion, but the girl hesitated and sullenly added:

"Why do I get excited? I might as well try

to move these mountains as to convince you of my innocence."

"Have I accused you? Did I ever accuse you?"

"You are not like other men, but your silence has spoken louder than the words of others."

"Take nothing for granted. While you remain free from accusation, be content."

"Content?" Eudora cried, fiercely. "How can I be content when the horrible doubt lingers over Margera's fate? How can I sleep in sleep, or see in life anything except a horrible nightmare?"

"I might believe your alleged regrets and fears more if I knew why you were in Allison Blake's company."

"I have sworn not to tell."

"Your pledge is sacred!" returned Scatter-shot, ironically.

"Suppose that we could restore Margera to you?"

"We?"

"Blake and I."

"They say that the hider can find. Without directing the least thrust to you, I'll say that it would not surprise me if Blake knows more than he will confess. I believe that man to be as false and evil as Judas of old. Why should you think you can find Margera, and why do you look in these uninhabited hills?"

Eudora was silent for some time.

"If I thought any good could be done by breaking my promise, I would do it," she finally answered, "but I do not. Some time, though, I may convince you that I am not all evil."

"For the sake of Margera's memory"—the surveyor's firm voice grew unsteady—"I hope you are not."

"How you loved her!"

Scatter-shot leaned upon his rifle, but made no reply.

"I shall never forget the horror of those days," Eudora continued. "Would to heaven that whatever fate overtook her could have been mine, instead. I was worthless; she was all that was good and noble, and a bright future seemed before her."

"Where is it now?"

"All hope is not gone."

"With me it is. I have given two years to an unavailing search; I have exhausted every clew which ingenuity could devise. Now I have given it up. Very likely you heard my explanation to the borderman. It was strictly true. I am an endless, objectless wanderer, but, having sought this region in order to secure excitement, novelty, adventure and solitude, I am making notes of its general features for the Government—not officially, but to aid a friend. Hence, you see I am wholly out of the world that knew me once."

"I can imagine your state of mind."

"I have simply withdrawn from the world in general."

"Yet, if Margera could be found, you would not persist."

"Try me, and see!" was the quick response.

"I well remember your steadfastness. You bore up under all troubles and doubts, as long as hope seemed to remain."

"And always doubted Allison Blake!"

Eudora did not reply.

"Yet," Scatter-shot resumed, "I find you now his companion. Am I to believe in him, or doubt you?"

"Above all, don't believe in him!" the girl exclaimed.

"Then I must doubt you!"

Thus far Alkali Abe had listened in eager wonder, but a diversion was at hand. He saw a figure approaching from the direction of the camp. Its movements were quick but noiseless, and like those of a spy.

The Game Chicken recognized Blake.

CHAPTER V.

ILL-MATCHED COMRADES QUARREL.

THE furtive air of the new-comer indicated an intention of spying upon Scatter-shot and Eudora, and Alkali Abe, gaining fresh dislike for Blake, resolved to set his plans to naught; so, while the latter was creeping up like a shadow, the big borderman rattled his rifle upon a rock loudly.

The young couple turned and saw Blake.

There was an interval of silence, and then Scatter-shot spoke coolly.

"You walk late, sir."

"No later than others I could name!" retorted Blake, his chagrin at being discovered leading him to speak venomously.

"We are not walking."

"Seems to me you have got acquainted very suddenly and mysteriously."

"The unexpected often happens."

"I would like to know who you are, sir?" declared Blake, belligerently.

"My name is Scatter-shot."

"Rubbish! A man who sails under such a title is either a knave or a fool."

"Thank you for your compliment, which is taken for what it is worth," replied Scatter-shot, calmly.

"It is clear that you two are old acquaintances," Blake continued, excitedly, "and I want to know who you are."

"You take a polite way of asking."

"I demand to know!"

"You have had all the information you will get."

Blake turned to Eudora.

"Return to camp!" he ordered.

"She will do nothing of the kind!" Scatter-shot responded, with calm firmness. "You mistake your prowess, Mr. Blake, if you think you can come here and intimidate us. Women have claims upon all men, and I shall not see Miss Redmoor ordered around at your will. I do not seek to make trouble between you, for I care nothing about your affairs; but I repeat that I shall protect her from your ruffianly course!"

Blake looked in silence at the speaker, and seemed to be dazed. There was something in this bold stand, tempered as it was with perfect self-control and coolness, that shook his confidence and put his belligerent plan of attack into disorder.

"I didn't think this of you, Eudora," he finally remarked, sulkily.

"What?"

"This stolen interview with a stranger."

"Why should you object?" interrupted the surveyor.

"Miss Redmoor is under my protection—"

"When she complains it will be time for you to defend her."

Blake grew angry again.

"Am I to be overlooked like a dog?" he cried.

"Are you her guardian?"

"As much so as you."

"This talk is idle. I am a free agent, certainly, and I presume that Miss Redmoor is, also. If she has any complaint to make, you can listen to it. Until then, I advise you to meddle no further. Let the lady decide this; let us hear if she complains."

"I do not," Eudora asserted, though not in the firmest of voice. "Furthermore, no one shall question my motives!"

"You do not escape me so easy, Mr. No-name!" declared Blake. "You came into camp as a spy, and began underhand work. What your object is I don't know, but I will not tolerate your interference. You or I must go!"

He laid hold of Scatter-shot's arm roughly. "Remove your hand!" commanded the surveyor, standing motionless.

"Not for you—"

"Remove it, or I will knock you down!"

Blake made a clutch at the speaker's throat, and hastened the catastrophe. Scatter-shot's arm moved, swept forward, and Blake fell under the force of a blow on the chest.

It was for caution rather than injury, and he suffered no harm except the shock of falling, but it aroused his worst passions.

He sprung up and drew a knife.

"Curse you!" he hissed; "I'll—"

He paused. His belligerent hand had been seized in a grasp which seemed to be crushing that member, and Alkali Abe's massive form towered beside him.

"Stop it!" the borderman ordered. "Stop it, or I'll gnash my teeth and grind ye to powder. Jabberin' jaguars! is this a slaughter-house, that you draw yer carver an' make a bid fur gore? Why, you pestiferous critter!" you kin thank yer lucky stars that I ain't already eat ye up. Drop it!"

He closed his fingers yet more tightly, and Blake groaned with pain. The knife fell from his grasp, and he stood brooding the injured hand with the other.

"A pooty how-d'ye-do, by Jericho!" Abe added, with a grizzly-like growl.

No one answered.

"My idee o' white men is that they should hev some sartain symptoms o' decency!" the veteran went on, with growing energy. "Ef this is a spot fur white ter carve white, I don't know it; ef it's a time o' year fur my comrades ter run a-muck, they kin take their run beyond my sight. Jabberin' jaguars! yes; I should say so!"

"Do you turn against me, too?" Blake demanded.

"I'm ag'in' all cuttin's and slashin's."

"This man insulted me!"

"I heerd it all."

"And you uphold him?"

"Ef you two hev a diffikilty, settle it. It ain't fur me ter do. But I warn ye that I ain't goin' ter hev any knife or revolver antics hyar. I'm boss o' this camp, an' I'm Alkali Abe, the Game Chicken o' Texas; the purifyin' plague that sets down on slashers like the temple did on the chaps t'other Samson seen fit ter do up."

"Poor courtesy, you give me."

"I advertise ter give justice to all."

"Except me!"

"Ef you don't like my style, toddle on ter other scenes and pastur's. Ef you was alone, you'd go anyhow; but I feel fur the gal. She's in bad company, by Jericho!"

The borderman looked at Eudora with feelings of gentleness such as rarely found place in his practical mind.

If she had appealed for help the result would not have been open to doubt, but she stood with averted face and said nothing.

"I accept the inevitable," Blake stiffly ob-

served, "and will make no more talk about it. Eudora, let us return to camp!"

The tone in which he addressed her was full of room for study. It was pacific, or so intended, and not without a touch of what was matter-of-fact, yet, in it, there was to be seen, also, a command, a threat, and a grain of fear.

Plainly, he did not know what the result would be.

He was not kept in suspense. Eudora moved at once. No one interfered, and the two walked back toward camp.

"A most abnormal snake!" Abe muttered.

He waited for a reply until he became impatient, and then demanded:

"Ain't you got nothin' ter say?"

"What can I say? Blake's ill-will toward me does not trouble me in the least. Further than that, his affairs are his own, not mine."

"But the gal?"

"What of her?"

"She's in bad company."

"She can leave it at any time by requesting aid and protection. Am I not right, scout?"

"You be, fur sure!"

"But I shall not force myself upon her. She is supposed to know her own business best, and as she has refused to confide in me, I infer that she does not want my help."

"You knowed her, of old?"

"Yes."

"Fine woman?"

"All women are!" Scatter-shot returned, with the trace of cold sarcasm often seen in his manner. "We can't judge women by their acts, for they don't act out their nature; so we can only take them as we do medicine, and call them agreeable if we do get the bitter taste of the drug."

"I'm afeerd you're a cynic."

"Quite possible."

"I ain't; I like the female sect. Like 'em better nor anything else in the world—except hosses—an' my rifle—an' dogs!"

The borderman made this maladroit comparison honestly, and without the least suspicion that it was not complimentary to the objects of his praise. Having disposed of this intellectual effort, he went on more fluently:

"It ain't fur me ter pry inter other folks' affairs, but this mystery works me up right smart."

"There is much about it that puzzles me, friend Abe, and what I know is not worth telling."

The Game Chicken saw that he was not going to get any information, and he accepted the situation philosophically.

"Wal, I advise you ter keep an eye open fur Mister Blake. He hates ye, an' has the will ter do ye mischief."

"I am well aware of it."

"I wouldn't sleep too sound ter-night, ef I was you."

"With your permission, I will sleep outside the camp. I shall thus be free from him, and may be useful."

"A good idee. Do it!"

"As for you, I ask you to have an eye upon Blake. See that he don't harm Miss Redmoor."

"I will, by Jericho!"

CHAPTER VI.

MISSING MEMBERS.

ALKALI ABE rose with the sun the following morning. He had slept more soundly than usual after returning from the interview outside the camp, and he started up with a feeling of guilt.

He looked around hurriedly. Silent Seth was still asleep, and the dog was lazily awiating human motion in camp, but the Game Chicken saw no more.

Eudora Redmoor was not in her former place; Allison Blake was invisible.

Abe sprung to his feet and looked further, but the missing couple were not near the camp. He hurriedly aroused Seth.

"Say, whar's our comp'ny?" he demanded.

"Dunno!" Seth calmly replied.

"Ain't you seen 'em?"

"Hardly!"

"Nor beerd 'em?"

"Hardly!"

"Jabberin' jaguars! what kin hev become o' them? Has he kidnapped her? But, no; he couldn't do that without alarm. Whar hev they gone? How fur? What fer?"

The excited borderman's roving glance caught sight of a piece of white paper pinned to the blankets lately used by Eudora. He caught it up, found written words thereon, and slowly read as follows:

"Not being used to such barbarous company as that lately inflicted upon us, and not caring to put up with further brutal insults, we hereby leave you. May your scalps dangle at Apache belts before the next sun sets!"

"There was no signature, but the masculine writing told the story."

"Mister Blake has spoke!" Abe observed, with sarcasm.

"So he's gone?"

It was Scatter-shot's quiet voice that asked the question, and the borderman turned and saw the former by his side.

"Gone, an' took the gal with him."

Abe passed over the paper, which Scatter-shot read attentively.

"I am not surprised," he remarked. "Fear, or some other strong motive, has led Miss Redmoor to accompany him away."

"They've gone ter their deaths."

"How do you know?"

"The 'Paches are all about, an' that civilization feller ain't no more fit ter cope with them nor I be with a hornet."

"Very likely."

"I don't keer fur him, but I do feel fur the gal. It's monstrous ter take her inter the 'Paches' grasp."

"We don't know the history of your late guests' presence in this region. The account of a camping-out party given by Blake is absurd when we consider the country between here and civilization. I believe your guests have companions somewhere near, for, otherwise, they make strange associates. Don't worry about them, scout; Blake would not leave, knowing Indians were near, if he did not have some means in view by which to protect his precious life."

"Wal it's queer, anyhow!"

Alkali Abe spoke with the emphasis of conviction, and shook his bushy head in a hopeless way.

With strange couples, young women, elephants and "little round men" wandering around in the uninhabited, desolate, Apache-infested hills, things were surely at a strange pass. Abandoning all hope of seeing the run-aways again, the remainder of the party had breakfast.

The Game Chicken's good opinion of Scatter-shot increased momentarily. The latter was sensible, manly and muscular—qualities which appealed to the dearest impulses of big Abraham's worthy heart. So he asked the surveyor to join their party indefinitely, and the offer was accepted.

Breakfast had hardly been finished when Lazarus uttered a warning growl. His master looked up hastily, and then his under jaw fell and he stared in blank and speechless wonder.

The "little round man" stood before him!

Upon a rock only a few yards away was a human figure of grotesque proportions. He was a man, but nothing like him had Abe ever seen before. His costume was of material which Abe had well said before was more fit for a woman than for the opposite sex. It was, too, not unlike a boy's, in style, for the waist was only a "jumper." The groundwork was of white, but red and blue squares at intervals, made a checker-board of its wearer.

He had neither hat nor cap upon his head, but no wisp of hair was revealed; it was bare and bald, but in a way unknown to Abe. In the middle of his forehead was an irregular streak line of red, and another in each cheek, showing in marked contrast to a very white face.

If the Game Chicken had been a circus-goer he would have seen in this strange figure the time-honored clown of the ring, minus a part of his facial paint and powder, much the worse for wear and very much alarmed; but lacking this clew, the scout saw only the most grotesque sight of his life.

Scatter-shot dimly realized the situation and was about to speak, but some one else forestalled him.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" gasped Alkali Abe, what Wild West imp is this?"

The "imp" suddenly fell upon its knees, lifted its clasped hands and dismally wailed:

"Don't kill me! don't kill me!"

"The critter is alive!" quoth Alkali Abe, wonderingly.

"Don't kill me! don't kill me!" reiterated the "imp."

Scatter-shot smiled and advanced a little.

"Rest easy," he replied. "You are in no danger here; we profess to be honest men. But what wind has blown you here?"

"Oh! I was with the circus!" wildly cried the stranger. "I got forty dollars a week and found, an' played poker with the Livin' Skeleton, which was good for more. But we're cast away; gloomy days have come. We are among the ferocious savages, who thirst for our blood! We shall be eaten at the stake! We shall be scalped! Oh! oh! spare my life! Oh! oh! I am an innocent man—"

His voice was rising louder and louder, and in a piercing key; and as Scatter-shot was not oblivious to the dangers of such an outcry, he advanced, seized the terrified speaker and shook him into silence.

"Now, get your wits back!" he sternly ordered. "We have had enough of this. You are among those who will be your friends if you will give them a chance. Be sensible!"

The nondescript was gasping for breath, but he managed to stammer:

"Ye-yes!"

"Who are you?"

"Yorick Laffingman."

"Do you belong to a circus?"

"I di-did, but it's wr-wr-wrecked!"

"You were the clown, eh?"

"Yes."

"Any of your companions near?"

"Yes; Roland Ludlow, the trapeze performer, and Ariadne, the Empress of Elephant Riders." Scatter-shot turned to Abe.

"Here is one mystery explained. All the strange sights you've seen come from a wrecked circus, and here is the clown."

"Is he really human?" Abe asked, in bewilderment.

"Very human."

"Ain't he a dandy? He's too pooty ter be used fur anything but a parlor. How does he feel?"

Honest Abe really appeared to regard Mr. Yorick Laffingman as a freak of nature, and to be very curious as to his structure. He advanced with outstretched hand, but the demoralized clown sprung up in terror and fled.

"You look too warlike for his taste," explained Scatter-shot, in amusement.

"He runs a good 'eal like a ginevine man, only more in a rollin' way."

"Have patience, and we can soon see the whole party; his story will bring them, unless they are as badly frightened as he."

"I don't jestly see what kind of an animal he is," Abe confessed, in perplexity.

He was enlightened, but his admiration for Yorick Laffingman fell not a little. He could not place his affections upon a Simon Pure man who was such a coward, although an "imp" would have a right to stay or go, advance or retreat, as he saw fit.

Scatter-shot's expectations were realized. In a short time another man made his appearance. He was clad without eccentricity, and in the garments of civilization.

Seeing that he hesitated to approach, the surveyor went to meet him. Watching attentively, Abe saw them come to an understanding, but finally they separated, and Scatter-shot returned alone.

"It is all clear now," he explained. "Our neighbors are 'remnants of a circus,' as yonder man puts it. The said circus was a border experiment, and it came to grief when the Apaches fell upon it. Only three of them are together—Ariadne, the Empress of Elephant Riders; Roland Ludlow, 'King of the Trapeze,' and Yorick Laffingman, the clown. Also Babel, the elephant."

"I'd like ter see that critter nearer by."

"You shall. Ludlow is going to bring his whole party. I have left it for you to say whether they join us permanently—I had no right to say—but they have had a terrible experience here. Unused to wild life, they have been in peril from Indians, and have suffered for want of food. Laffingman is almost out of his senses with fear, and Ludlow and the girl are about worn out with fatigue."

"We'll take 'em to our hearts, by Jericho! Yes, sir; we hereby adopt them forthwith!"

"Look! they are coming!"

Sure enough, the "remnants" of the circus were coming.

The central figure was Babel, the elephant, while Ariadne was in her accustomed place on his back. The gigantic animal moved with the slow and dignified step of his kind, and Alkali Abe stared in mute wonder and admiration.

After the leaders came Laffingman and Ludlow—the latter a young man of pleasant face and good form.

Scatter-shot at once presented him to Abe. "Glad ter see ye, by Jericho!" the Game Chicken declared. "We ain't fixed so as ter make luxury and you close friends, but we kin show ye how ter fool the 'Paches, mebber."

"Do that," Ludlow answered, "and we will put up with anything else. We are not hypercritical, but we do object to furnishing scalps for the red-skins. My hair suits me best right where it is."

"That's a proper sentiment, but jabberin' jaguars! the elephant has been skulped, ain't he?"

"Not yet, nor is he likely to be. Babel is a warrior; he attacks the Apaches at every chance, and always wins; he has saved our lives twice."

"I seen him do it once."

"Yesterday? Yes; Yorick and I were about to be gobbled by the reds, but Babel charged them and put the whole gang to flight."

CHAPTER VII.

BORNE THROUGH THE CANYON.

It was nearing night. Alkali Abe and his party were encamped a mile from the location where the former had passed the previous night. The manner of the several members of the party indicated danger. Abe, Seth, Scatter-shot and Roland Ludlow were wary and alert; Ariadne was anxious; Yorick was in a state of trepidation.

Danger did menace them. The Apaches were moving in the hills in such numbers that it would be madness to attack them, and a rifle-shot might prove fatal.

That the fugitives were still alive was due almost wholly to Alkali Abe, who, with the shrewdness born of long experience, had thus far kept them out of the hands of the enemy, but only by skillful dodging.

It was an unwieldy party to manage, con-

sisting, as it did, of six persons, five horses and Babel, the elephant.

The latter's size was greatly against secrecy, but he was obedient and sagacious. At Ariadne's command he would kneel or lie down, and in a crisis, his mountain of flesh could be made as free from observation as possible, but when he walked he was a prominent object.

It had been decided that they should make an attempt to pass out of the Apaches' reach as soon as darkness fell, and the present mood was one of doubt, uncertainty, hope and fear.

The Game Chicken looked at the fading light.

"We'll soon put it to the test," he observed. "The night will be dark enough ter suit, an' ef we kin keep from runnin' onto the red imps, we'll git through."

"We can throw out scouts, as we have three men fit for the work," answered Scatter-shot.

"Zactly. Seth Mason shall be the scout, too. He shall go ahead an' feel out the ground, an' I must say we couldn't hev a better man. The rest on us will keep in a bunch."

"That is well arranged."

"I hope we shall hold our nerve, too."

The Game Chicken looked doubtfully at Yorick Laffingman. The latter was the weakling of the party, and a badly-frightened man. He may have been the life of the circus ring, but now no joke framed itself in his mind, or passed his lips.

Abe's temporary admiration had given place to contempt; he could not but despise a person whose abject cowardice was so at variance with his own lion-like courage.

The big borderman's worship had been transferred to Babel, and he never tired of regarding that animal. The elephant's dignified movements, and manifestations of great strength, were revelations to the scout.

Ariadne was an interesting young lady. She was small of stature, bright, quick of motion and of mind, and her courage had already been proven.

Night fell, and the party moved. Neither moon nor stars showed to guide them, but the mountain-peaks in the distance were enough for the veteran bordermen. As before arranged, Silent Seth led the way and the others followed.

The first half-mile was made successfully.

At the end of that time Seth paused. Abe joined him, in advance, and was informed that the Indians were ahead in great number. There was only one thing to do in such a case, and a deviation toward the north was made.

This took them toward a vicinity wholly unknown to them, but there was no known cause for additional fears.

For a mile all went well; then Silent Seth found himself stopped by a stream which appeared large enough to be called a river. He waited for the others. The stream was found to be nearly thirty yards wide, and the further side presented a high bank.

"The water runs rayther swift," the Game Chicken remarked, "but we may be able ter ford it. Let me gauge the speed."

He bent over the water, but almost immediately exclaimed:

"Jabberin' jaguars!"

"What now?" Scatter-shot asked.

"A boat, by Jericho!"

"A boat?"

"Yes."

"How can that be?"

"Now you've got me! A boat in these parts is about as queer as an elephant, an' I won't try ter explain; but hyar she be, with oars in it."

"It seems a lucky chance, anyhow. What is to hinder our crossing in it? The horses can be made to swim over, when our non-combatants are put safe on the other side."

"That's a fact, but we won't cross until we reconnoiter t'other side. The stream is a bit swifter than I like. Who kin use an oar skillful?"

"I can," Scatter-shot answered.

"And I," Ludlow added.

"Then you two row Seth Mason over an' let him squint about on t'other side; the boat carries four oars. Have a care, or mebber you'll git upset an' wet yer slippers."

The three men indicated entered the boat, and Scatter-shot and Roland rowed out. From the first it was to be seen that the current was dangerously swift, but the oarsmen were really skillful, and they progressed well enough for the first thirty feet.

Then, suddenly, the boat was struck by a band of water that was rushing furiously—the center and deepest part of the stream—and a warning cry arose from Scatter-shot's lips.

"Hold hard!" he directed.

The words had hardly passed his lips when one of Ludlow's oars broke short off, and the boat swung around sharply. Scatter-shot pulled with all his strength to force it toward the bank, but all in vain. The current had them in its grasp, and the boat began to go rapidly down stream. One of the surveyor's oars was twisted out of his grasp as if by giant hands, and then they were comparatively helpless.

Alkali Abe shouted from the bank, and Silent Seth stood up and made a long leap into darkness and the stream.

This nearly upset the boat, but as soon as it

righted, Scatter-shot and Roland prepared to follow. They were too late. Rocks suddenly rose on each side, and they knew that they could not gain footing under such circumstances.

Each held to an oar, trying to keep the boat from upsetting.

"Watch your chance!" the surveyor shouted.

"Ay, ay!" Ludlow returned, coolly.

But the chance did not come. Instead of ceasing, the rocky walls grew higher and higher, and something like fear seized upon Scatter-shot.

"I believe we are entering a canyon!" he soon added.

"Looks that way."

Neither commented on the probable result, but it was clearly realized. They knew that there were canyons in the hills with walls of rock hundreds of feet high, where the water raced madly over sharp rocks; where falls of from five to a hundred feet occurred; and which seemed sure death to a navigator.

That they were drifting to any more favored region neither dared to hope, but they could do no more than to meet what might come. Resistance was out of the question. The boat was going with great rapidity. It seemed to be on a field of snow, for the water was churned to a foam.

Much of the latter came from the sides, where the stream dashed against rocky recesses, but it suggested the probability that there were rocks in mid-stream.

To run upon one of these meant death.

No swimmer could live in that current.

It was a terrible test of courage, but the young men were not found lacking. They kept their places, each using his oar as a skillful boatman might, to do what little they could to keep the boat upright.

The bed of the stream fell fast, but even faster rose the walls of rock, until the navigators were in a narrow channel three hundred feet deep.

All was darkness above. The cloud-curtained heavens could be seen but dimly, and like a ribbon, while the rocky walls were black. Only the foam on the stream's surface broke the utter gloom.

The roar of the water did not greatly interfere with conversation, and Ludlow finally improved the chance.

"I reckon it's all up with us!" he shouted, with commendable calmness.

"Not yet," Scatter-shot replied.

"We shall go over a fall, yet."

"Perhaps not."

"Such are the chances, anyhow."

"I admit that, but I am not without hope. I've gone through danger before, and may weather this. Never say die!"

"Oh! we'll hang on to the last!"

"This tunnel must end somewhere."

"It may lead into the Grand Canyon of the Colorado."

"We shall grow old before we get there, so it won't make any difference."

"I hope poor Ariadne and the others will come out all right."

"Amen, to that!"

It spoke well for them that they could think of others, then, for their race with death was wild and thrilling. There was no sign of the dreaded falls, but the current sped like an arrow. The boat was like a feather upon the stream, but it was proving itself wonderfully buoyant and stanch. It sat lightly on the surface, and went rushing along like a part of the power that bore it.

Time wore on, and one thing became evident: at the speed they were going the distance of a mile was but a trifle, and with so many miles soon left behind they were, certainly, hopelessly separated from the companions of their past adventures.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN STRANGE COMPANY.

THE boat gave a sudden lurch.

"We are getting into rougher water!" Ludlow shouted.

"Yes. Watch well, and be ready to offset any danger by using your oar," Scatter-shot replied.

Both men were uneasy. The change in the water had been noticeable, and they feared it heralded something worse.

Were the dreaded falls being neared?

The navigators looked ahead anxiously.

"Take care!" Scatter-shot cried, suddenly, "there are rocks ahead of us. Force the boat to the left!"

They used their oars, but had to contend with a power greater than their own. The grasp of the current was upon the boat, and it was reluctant to turn a fraction from its course, yet the water ahead plainly indicated breakers. If they went upon the rocks, it would be the last of the boat.

But their efforts were not to go in vain. The boat finally answered their call, and answered so suddenly as to cause a catastrophe.

Its course changed, it shot away at an angle; and its turn was so abrupt, and the force of the water upon its side so great, that it careened until it dipped water.

But this was a trifle in comparison with the other results.

Scatter-shot was on the further side, and when it made its sharp movement he was flung headlong overboard and into the water.

Just where he struck Ludlow did not know, for he was thrown to his own knees, and only saved himself by clinging to the boat.

The latter speedily righted, shook itself, as it seemed, and then plunged away to renew the race. But it had only one occupant, and Roland, still clinging to the frail support, looked back in speechless horror.

Scatter-shot had been left in the boiling flood, and his late companion was helpless to save him. He could not even see the unfortunate man. From the moment when he went overboard he had been lost to view.

For the first time Roland's courage failed.

He had known Scatter-shot only a short time, but such a peril as that of the canyon makes bonds of friendship, and the violent sundering of their companionship appalled them.

He was soon far away from the place, but he made no effort to use again the single oar now left. He remained like one turned to stone, full of despair and terror.

But a change was at hand. Even in his dazed state he became aware that a sullen roaring sound was breaking upon his ears. Beginning faintly, it rapidly grew louder, and he did not fail to grasp its meaning.

The dreaded fall was at hand!

For a moment the fact gave him fresh alarm, but he rallied as a brave man will. Death seemed to be inevitable, and no act of his could avert what fate had in store for him. He grew calm, and turned his face toward the front with admirable nerve.

Louder grew the sound, swifter ran the water, and he grasped the seat of the boat firmly.

If he was to be saved that was his proper course; if there was no hope, it would soon be over.

On rushed the boat; the foam gave place to vacancy; the little craft leaped into the air like an arrow—it fell, fell—there was a shock and Ludlow lost consciousness.

When he recovered he found himself lying in bed. For a moment he did not remember what had last occurred, and he opened his eyes and looked around in wonder.

He was in an unfamiliar room, and one furnished in a way new to him. The bed was massive, and of style he had never seen before. So of all the furniture. The walls were of wood, elaborately grained, and of a light, yellowish hue, like some common wood. Over the lower half of them were curtains of gray, trimmed with scarlet in a fanciful style, while the ceiling, which was of silver-gray, came down at every point with a curve, leaving no corners or acute angles.

He was bewildered, but, remembering his recent adventures, realized that he had fallen into human hands—a singular fact, since no habitation was supposed to be within scores of miles.

He arose.

Motion produced some pain, but his bones appeared to be whole. An ordinary window was set in the wall, and he went to it and looked out.

Greatly to his surprise, he saw that the earth was far below, as if he was in a building of at least four stories. More than that, a regular street was below, with houses and other buildings on each side, though no other was as lofty as that he was in.

While he looked several horsemen appeared, but strange riders they were.

Each man carried a spear, which he seemed to rest in some socket of the saddle upon which he sat; each wore a helmet upon his head, and a breast-plate over his chest. Each, too, was clad in a peculiar costume of gray and orange. In brief, uniformly clad, they looked strange to a radical degree, while their spears and partial armor recalled the days of chivalry and knight-hood to Roland's mind.

While he was looking he heard a door open behind him. He turned quickly. He was no longer alone in the room; another man had entered. He, too, was an object strange to Ludlow's eyes.

He was dressed in gray from head to foot, and, in place of a coat, wore a frock which reached half way from his waist to his knees. The material, as well as the style, of his garments was peculiar.

"Sir, I hope you are well," said this man, in good English.

"Yes," Ludlow mechanically answered.

"I am glad, sir."

"Where in the world am I?" cried the ex-King of the Trapeze, with sudden force.

"In King Richard's house, sir."

"Where?"

The former words were calmly repeated.

"And what town is this?"

"It is No-World Kingdom, sir!"

"I am none the wiser, now."

"I will send Cleon, sir."

The man in gray bowed low and withdrew.

"Upon my word!" Ludlow muttered, "I am not sure but I am out of the world. Why is all this mummery? I can't understand it. A town

where no human life was supposed to exist; strangely garbed men; something about 'King Richard,' and No-World Kingdom.' I don't understand!"

Once more the door opened, and a second stranger appeared. He was dressed like the first, except that his frock was of orange color, trimmed with gray. He saluted the young man with a dignified gesture.

"Sir, I am glad to see you up," he declared. "Allow me to announce myself as Cleon, one of King Richard's Legion!"

"And what is the Legion?"

"It is composed of the warriors under Alaric, the centurion, who is military leader of the Hermit People."

"Oh!"

Ludlow began to have an inkling of the truth.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

"You were found insensible at the foot of Jacob's Cataract, sir, and brought here by some of the slaves."

"And where am I?"

"This is No-World Kingdom—"

"Can't you be more explicit?"

"I can, sir. This is a town situated in a valley of the mountains, and we are a people of whose existence the outside world knows nothing. We never go out; no outsider ever comes in. We are a people by ourselves; a world by itself. In brief, you are in a land which exists in the knowledge of its occupants, only."

"A secret city."

"If you like the term, sir."

"Why do you live in this way?"

"You will excuse me, sir, but all other questions I must allow King Richard to answer."

"Send him here!"

"Sir," replied Cleon, in cold, haughty surprise, "that I cannot do. King Richard is sole monarch here. We await his pleasure; you must do the same."

"I perceive; but I am in a whirl of confusion. I don't understand my situation. I was told that no human being existed near here."

"By whom, sir?"

The question was quietly and deliberately uttered, but Ludlow at once became on his guard. He had decided that these men of No-World Kingdom were not friendly to the outside world, and it might be to his advantage not to speak too freely.

"Scouts and bordermen, in general," he returned.

"Were they with you, sir?"

"Yes."

"Did they come over the cataract?"

"My two companions fell into the stream, and I fear they were drowned. By the way, I want to see this town of yours. I'll go out with you."

"The doctor has said it will not be prudent for you to leave your room, at present, sir."

"But I'm all right!"

"You had better obey the doctor, sir."

There was calm decision in Cleon's voice, and Ludlow could not mistake the situation. He was a prisoner in the room!

CHAPTER IX.

THE LADY OF THE DIAMONDS.

LUDLOW was again alone. Cleon had gone about his business, and when the ex-King of the Trapeze tried the door he found it fastened.

He took another look out of the window. For some distance stretched a valley, and there was every evidence that it was one of marked fertility. Grain and other agricultural products were to be seen in luxuriant growth.

Beyond this valley were the hills, rising in dignity almost to the height of mountains. The change was sudden; wherever he could see the valley ended at a sheer cliff, and a more barren region than the visible part of the hills he had never beheld.

In the distance trees were to be seen, but near the rim of the valley he could not discern a single green thing.

His wandering gaze found another sight. At one point there was a break in the cliff, dark above, but white and glittering below, like the brightest silver. He shivered as he realized that it was there he had come over the falls—shivered, although, with the sunlight fallen upon the mad waste of foam, the scene was one of rare beauty.

He shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

"I'm in for it!" he muttered, "but what is it to be? Who are these people? Outlaws? Hardly! I have been told that they do not associate with the outside world, and never leave the valley. This might be false, but the fact remains that there is no one to plunder within hundreds of miles. Hence, this must be a people who are, as I have been informed, a world by themselves!"

He paused to speculate upon the strangeness of the idea.

"Roland, my boy, you are on the biggest trapeze you ever grappled!" he pursued. "Giddy flights are probably ahead of you; flights in which you will be a mere cipher. Look out that you don't fall off and break your neck! In one sense, too, I am now the trapeze—lifeless, helpless, yielding to every whim of the

stronger force; and these hybrid representatives of two ages of the world are the performers. Probably they'll have a merry dance on my neck!"

His spirits were rising, and if it had not been for memory of Scatter-shot's fate, and the known peril of Ariadne and her companions, he would have been reconciled to the situation.

Once more the door opened, but this time the intruder was not a grim-visaged man. Instead, it was a girl who, though dressed in unbroken gray, was far from being ill-looking.

She laid her finger on her lips, as though to enjoin silence.

"With pleasure!" Roland answered, with reckless submission to the reign of the mysterious.

"My mistress wished to see you, if you please, remarked the girl."

"I shall be delighted."

"We must not be discovered, though."

"Decidedly not!"

"Follow me, then!"

"One moment, angel of Fairy Land! Who are you?"

"Zorana, sir."

"And who is your mistress?"

"Oh! how stupid! I forgot that you might not know. She is Ilzarra, sir."

"I waded in relics of the Dark Ages, it seems!" muttered Roland. "Ilzarra, Zorana, Cleon—what next? And who is Ilzarra?" he added, audibly.

"She is a prisoner, here, like yourself, sir."

"Now you begin to talk!" the young man exclaimed. "Lead the way, at once! A secret interview, with the prospect, if discovered, of being beheaded by the unknown King Richard. I'll risk it! Lead on!"

Zorana obeyed. They passed out into a broad hall, went a few yards and entered another room. Ludlow was in Ilzarra's presence.

He saw a lady rise to greet him, and was almost dazzled by her beauty. She was tall, well formed, of noble presence and rarely attractive. She was clad in garments of gray and scarlet, and diamonds flashed as she moved. The number and splendor of the gems amazed the ex-King of the Trapeze.

He stood speechless, but the lady spoke at once—musically, yet hurriedly, betraying anxiety and fear.

"I am told that you are a prisoner here," she began, abruptly.

"I am," Ludlow returned.

"Where were you captured?"

"I accidentally came over the falls."

"And survived it?" she questioned, in surprise.

"As you see."

"Are you an honest man?"

"I claim to be."

"And your name?"

"Is Roland Ludlow."

"Are you reconciled to captivity here?"

"No."

The lady of the diamonds drew a deep breath. She had spoken with great rapidity, and Roland had not been less ready in his replies. He began to realize that he had fallen among desperate men. They might not be outlaws in the common acceptance of the term, but they might be worse.

"I, too, am a prisoner," the lady resumed. "I have been here a long time—nearly two years. My name since I came has been Ilzarra, and by that name you may know me. The king's centurion, Alaric, has chosen me as his wife, and as I will not consent, I am kept prisoner in King Richard's palace."

"Who are these men with the absurd names?"

"Their early history I do not know, but they are now a community by themselves. They hold no association with the world at large, except that, at rare intervals, a few of them go to buy things not to be raised here. By this I mean clothing; all else is produced in this valley by themselves."

"But what is the object of their hermitage?"

Ilzarra touched the diamonds that sparkled at her throat.

"I can find no answer except here. I know that precious stones are found somewhere near, and I suspect that the gathering of them is the chief motive of their lives, though I am sure that the first members of the band had some other motive for coming here at the beginning."

"They were fugitives from the law perhaps."

"That is what I suspect. Certain it is that many of the later comers are desperate men, and none, new or old, are open to pity."

"A strange community!"

"They are not the first settlers. I am told that there are here the ruins of a town inhabited by a race which has passed away from earth and left no history. You must have read of them. I refer to the cliff-dwellers, and the other strange, extinct races of the Southwest."

"Certainly."

"King Richard thinks the old people of this valley were co-existent with the cliff-dwellers, but whether the same, he does not know. Certainly, these valley-men, while imitating the cliff-dwellers somewhat, were more civilized. But why do I speak of such trivial matters? You

are a prisoner here. Do you know what your fate is to be?"

"No."

"Then you have been told nothing?"

"Nothing whatever."

"I think your life will be spared."

"That's encouraging!"

"Moreover, the fact that you were brought to the king's palace indicates that you are not to be a slave. All who come here, by accident, design, or otherwise, must join King Richard's people or die. Certain ones are made slaves, or servants; others are given better places, and, if faithful, may finally become members of the nobility."

"Who are the half-armored men in gray and orange I saw riding in the street?"

"The warriors, or soldiers. When you see a man, or a woman, his or her position may be determined at a glance. King Richard, and the favored ones of his household, wear gray and scarlet, the so-called 'nobility' wear gray and blue; the warriors, gray and orange; the slaves, or working people, plain gray."

"A novel arrangement."

"Let us speak of ourselves. Captivity has become torture to me. From the first, the centurion, Alaric, claimed me as his wife. Of course I refused. Ever since I have been kept here, and I have lived in constant dread. King Richard is considered the sternest, most merciless of the band, yet I know he has been the sole rock of defense between me and Alaric."

"The king has favored you, then?"

"Scarcely that, but, as I have constantly refused, the king has made Alaric wait. There is a mystery in the king's manner toward me. Never before, I am told, has he protected any one as he has protected me. Why is it?"

"I should say that he covets you for himself."

"No, no; that is not it; I am sure it is not. His manner is very strange; sometimes, it partakes of pitiful tenderness. Sometimes he looks at me with sorrow, perhaps with remorse. I can't analyze his manner; he who is stern and severe toward every one else, seems to be strangely, gloomily moved by me."

"You are lucky."

"Ah! but, of late, I think I see signs of his yielding to Alaric—Heaven help me!"

"That is unfortunate, indeed."

"You must see now what I mean."

Ilzarra had been speaking rapidly from the first, but with a measure of calmness. She now exhibited feverish anxiety. She continued:

"The time has come when I must escape from here. I have watched for a chance ever since I came, but in vain. Now, I must make a chance. You, sir, are lately from the outside world, and you look like an honest man."

"I hope I am."

"As yet you have not been tempted by the allurements of wealth, power, or whatever King Richard may offer. When you are tempted, and see death opposed as the only alternative, you would not be weak to fall, to accept."

"That remains to be seen."

"Now, I am a woman, and, as such, I appeal to you for aid—"

"You shall have it!" Ludlow declared.

"So I ask you to act shrewdly before the king; hesitate, deceive him, yield, at last; and then, as a member of the band, act to rescue me."

"I will: I give my word of honor!"

"Heaven bless you! I see the star of hope, at last. Now, time is precious; we cannot prolong this interview. My maid—and friend—Zorana, here, is the only person whom we can trust—"

Ilzarra paused and grew suddenly pale and dismayed. Terror seemed to seize upon her. Yet, Roland had heard only the tinkling of a bell.

"King Richard is coming!" Ilzarra gasped.

CHAPTER X.

THE KING OF THE HERMIT PEOPLE.

LUDLOW was startled. He realized the consequences of a discovery of this secret interview, both to himself and to Ilzarra, and did not underestimate the importance of the announcement.

Woe be to them all if King Richard found him there!

In this emergency Zorana, the servant, proved that her wits were not slumbering.

"The curtain!" she exclaimed. "You must hide there!"

Unlike the room in which Ludlow found himself when he recovered, Ilzarra's had curtains which completely covered the wall. Zorana swept these aside at one point, and it was not hard to grasp her project.

The ex-King of the Trapeze moved hastily and passed the hangings; they fell again, and he was concealed.

The door opened, and a gray servant appeared.

"His Majesty, King Richard!" she announced.

A dignified, slow step sounded, and a man entered. Troubled as Roland Ludlow was, he would not miss the chance to see the ruler of the secret valley. He moved the curtain a trifle, and looked cautiously.

He saw a man of forty-five or more years, who was a model of strength and physical development. Lacking a trifle of being six feet in

height, he had broad shoulders, a full chest, square back and limbs of unusual size.

The spectator had never seen a man of nobler proportions.

The king's hair was of jet blackness, and not long. His face was smoothly shaven, but it was one that could not be shaven white. The black beard gave the lower part of the face an Ethiopian darkness, and added to the impressiveness of his appearance. His eyes were large, dark, and strangely powerful.

Clearly, he was a man of great firmness, iron will, resolution and mental strength.

He bowed to Ilzarra without appearing to notice her agitation.

"You will excuse me for intruding," he said, in a low, deep and musical voice, "but I have come on business."

"No apology is necessary, King Richard," Ilzarra managed to reply. "Pray, be seated!"

"Thank you."

He sat down. Ilzarra was recovering her composure, and she noticed something new in the monarch's appearance. There was a heaviness, weariness, almost a load of melancholy upon him, and she grew freshly troubled.

"I have come on business," he repeated, in a dull way. "I will proceed to it at once."

He looked at the floor, instead of at Ilzarra, and went on in his former manner.

"Several months have passed since first you came among the Hermit People. When you first arrived our good centurion, Alaric, following the custom of our land, claimed you as his wife. You objected, and I bade Alaric wait."

"For which I am very grateful!" Ilzarra exclaimed, quickly.

"So it has been ever since," the king proceeded, without spirit. "Time and again you have given the same reply, and still I have granted you respite. This is against the rules of the Hermit People; no one can live here without becoming one of us, and we can give a woman no place in the kingdom without making her the wife of one of us."

"But I am afraid of Alaric!" declared Ilzarra, tremulously.

"He is a worthy man."

"Is he?"

"In all No-World Kingdom he is second to none but myself."

"But is he a worthy—an honorable man?"

"Would we trust him so, otherwise?"

"He may be faithful to the Hermit People—I do not doubt that he is—but can you truthfully say he is free from evil, and the man to make a woman happy?"

"He is after the same pattern as the rest of us," King Richard answered, uneasily.

"Ah! you can not speak well of him!" exclaimed Ilzarra.

"However that may be, he has his rights under our laws."

"Have I none?"

"You, like him, are subject to the law. Being here, you must conform to our rules. I have violated them by making Alaric wait so long. Now, I can delay no longer—"

"King Richard—"

"I may as well speak plainly. Alaric has, at last, demanded his rights, and I can not refuse him; it is impossible. More than that, if he would still delay, you could no longer remain under this roof!"

"Do you refuse me its shelter?" cried Ilzarra, in deep agitation.

"I must! Affairs are at a pass where I am helpless; there are storms without and storms within. I have unlawfully sheltered you, violating the commandments of the Hermit People to please you, and my motives have been misconstrued. From the first, my royal consort, Queen Augusta, has been addicted to occasional accusations against me and my motives; she has accused me of desiring you for myself!"

"King Richard!"

"It is true. In plain words, the queen is jealous!"

Still looking at the floor, still holding his gloomy manner, the monarch made the assertion in a manner which left no doubt of its truthfulness in Ilzarra's mind.

After a brief pause he continued:

"Matters have been growing serious for some time, and, at last, Queen Augusta, like Alaric, has arrived at a decision—she declares that you must leave this palace!"

Ilzarra was dismayed.

"Why should she do this?"

"Jealousy!"

"But there is no reason for it."

"Can you convince her?"

"I can try, if she will see me—"

"She will not. She has always refused; she still refuses."

"But why should she be jealous of me, any more than of any one else?"

King Richard shook his head.

"It is useless to speculate; the fact remains."

"But, surely, you will not let this influence you—"

"Do you know that your very life would be in danger if we defied her?" the king asked, abruptly.

"My life!"

"Augusta carries a knife! She could gain en-

trance to your room if she desired, and I tell you frankly that, if we were to oppose her and Alaric further, your life would pay the penalty!"

The color faded from Ilzarra's face.

"Surely, she would not do that—"

"She would do it, as surely as you now live!"

The captive gazed at the somber-voiced speaker in silent consternation.

He was quiet for a moment; then he looked up suddenly and continued:

"You see what the situation is. I can say truthfully that I am sorry for you; if I had not been I should not have stood so long between you and Alaric. I would to heaven that you had never come to No-World Kingdom!"

"Send me away!" cried Ilzarra, catching at the one remaining hope.

"Impossible! My oath to the Hermit People would forbid it, and, even if I dared to venture, there is not one among my subjects I would trust to aid me; to guide you—"

"Let me go alone!"

"Again, impossible! There are some bounds which cannot be overstepped, and this is one of them. The die is cast! Having cared for you so long I would wish it otherwise, but, menaced by Alaric's demand and Queen Augusta's vindictiveness, I do not refuse any longer. Your life depends upon your marrying Alaric. Do you consent?"

Ilzarra was brave and far-sighted, and she knew, at last, that there was no such thing as moving King Richard. This being so, her fertile mind began to rally and seek expedients. If she could no longer have the king for a partial protector, she must work against him to the limit of her ingenuity and resources.

"When must the sacrifice take place?" she asked.

The king's stern face moved suddenly, and pity was revealed in the unguarded expression, but he was speedily himself again.

"Alaric will give you one week for preparation."

"If I am, indeed, to meet this fate, the time suits me well. Say as much to that man!"

She spoke in a hard voice, trying to hide her relief. If a week was vouchsafed, what might she not do in that time, with Roland Ludlow's help?

King Richard rose abruptly, his manner far from calm.

"It shall be so," he said; and then walked out of the room.

Not until his steps had died away did any one in the place move. Then Ilzarra ran to the curtain, swept it away and faced Ludlow.

"You see!" she cried.

"I see, and I promise to devote my every energy to your service. Your plan shall be followed."

"Enough! I dare not talk of it further, now; I tremble to think what your long absence may bring about. What if they go to your room? Return, at once, I beg of you, and Zorana shall see you again!"

She was pushing him toward the door, and he was not reluctant to go.

"You have seen," she went on, "that my very life is menaced, and I have no hope save in you."

"Hope on!" Ludlow answered. "I will rescue you, or die in the effort. I swear it!"

He pressed her hand; the door opened; it closed, and Ilzarra was left alone.

Zorana accompanied Ludlow to the door of his own prison-place, and they were pleased to find that there was no evidence that any one had been there during his absence. The maid only remained to assure him that she would come again, and then returned to her mistress.

She found Ilzarra excitedly pacing the floor.

"Hope and fear!—fear and hope!" the captive exclaimed. "My mind is like an amphitheater, with beasts of every kind fighting therein. Hope and fear!—but fear rules the hour. Shall I manage to escape with this stranger, or shall I die by Queen Augusta's knife, or—let me not speak of Alaric!"

"Do not think of him; think only of escape!" advised Zorana, putting her arm around her mistress's waist.

"I do not forget how all things are against us—but I hope to escape or die. Better Queen Augusta's knife than further imprisonment. The outside world from which I was so rudely taken two years ago, has ties for me— But why speak of them?"

She raised her hand to her fever-flushed forehead, and then went to the window, opened it and looked out.

A party of Alaric's gray-orange clad warriors were passing, and among them were a man and a woman plainly not of the valley. Ilzarra sighed. Others had come to taste of captivity.

The female rider looked up. Her own face was half-concealed by her hat, but Ilzarra's was plainly revealed. The horsewoman looked, raised one hand blindly toward her eyes, and then fell fainting into the arms of the nearest warrior.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RUINED CITY.

A MAN sat disconsolately upon a rock, holding his head in his hands. He seemed to be in pain, and, in certain ways, was a hard-looking object. His clothing was torn and discolored, and up

on his face and hands were abrasions of the skin.

The man was Scatter-shot—alive!

He arose and shook himself carefully. Pains here and there caused him to grimace, but he bore them philosophically. He looked to the right, where a flood of water was rushing madly past in its channel. Around him cliffs arose far in the air. At his left was a small channel, a smaller canyon, and a smaller stream.

This was the secret of the upsetting of the boat on the previous night. It had, so to speak, tried to take both channels at once, and succeeded so poorly that Scatter-shot was pitched out and flung up on dry land between them.

That was the last he knew until the dawn of day. When he regained consciousness he was stiff and sore, but far better than a dead man.

Like Ludlow, he had been saved by a strange chance; perhaps, by the proverbial one in a thousand.

Two hours had passed, and he was far from recovered, but he realized the necessity of action.

"Ever since the boat began its mad race I have been going deeper into unknown and unexplored country. Deprived of every weapon but my knife, I may well wonder if I shall ever get out alive," the explorer thought. "We went miles in that mad voyage, and Alkali Abe and the others were about to start in a direction exactly opposite. They must suppose us dead; they will not look for us. I cannot hope that Ludlow is alive, so I am left to believe myself all alone in this man-forsaken region, with only a knife between me and starvation. Pleasant prospect!"

He could hear the roar of the falls over which Ludlow had gone, but a point of rock prevented him from seeing them. Hence, he did not know that a valley was so near.

In the larger channel the water pressed close to the cliffs on both sides. In the smaller, and it was much smaller, there was ample room on both sides of the stream.

Having nowhere else to go, he decided to follow the channel.

This he did.

The stream soon ceased to exist. It flowed over a ledge, spread out among loose rocks and disappeared among them.

But the canyon continued, and Scatter-shot followed it.

He had gone only a few rods when it suddenly widened into a valley. He looked upon the scene, and then paused in surprise.

"How like a ruined city!" he exclaimed.

The resemblance was strong. He could trace streets and buildings; could discern, he thought, walls, windows, pillars and roofs. A city of stone, but one of silence, desolation and ruin. He could see no building that was intact.

No prolonged survey was necessary to establish the fact that he was looking upon, not a mimic town, but one of the nature his exclamation had indicated; it was really a ruined city, or town.

He advanced in a mood of wonder which made him forget everything else. He knew that the place must be very old, but, having some knowledge of the discoveries already made in the Southwest, of ruins, he was not prepared to see a ruin like this.

It was not the town of a purely defensive people, with the entrance at the top and the mode of ascent a movable ladder; on the contrary, there had been streets, doors and windows, like modern buildings, though of a very dissimilar style of architecture.

The blocks of stone which, in every case, was the building material, were smoothly and accurately cut, but he could not doubt that they were of great age.

He advanced and stood among the ruins.

Once there, he made a new discovery. Some of the walls had been disturbed; the blocks of stone had disappeared, and the work did not seem to have been done long before.

"I am not the first man among the moderns to come here," he thought, "but what can have been done with the blocks?"

He pursued his search. Some of the buildings he entered. The greater part appeared to have been dwellings, but others, though not high, had a surface area which bespoke former public edifices.

With the exception of lofty rooms and admirable architecture, he found but little to tell of the lost race, but the field for speculation was unlimited.

Who had they been? Were they co-existent with the cliff-dwellers, or did they ante-date them? If the former, it was evident that they were the stronger race, as they certainly had been the more civilized. Perhaps the one dwelt high in air, drawing up ladders to prevent the ingress of interlopers, out of fear of the other.

However that might be, the explorer knew that he had found evidence of a race not known in history, legend, or to modern investigators.

Continuing his wanderings, he found a peculiar state of affairs at the northern side of the valley.

The buildings did not end before, or when the rocks were reached, but presented the singular appearance of being crushed under them. In some cases one-half of a house was intact, while

the other half was under huge masses of rock—or, at least, invisible. Again, one-third, or two-thirds would show.

There was but one way of accounting for this. At some time a convulsion of Nature had taken place which had swept the rocks down upon the town, crushing the buildings in their path, and burying them under the weight of tons.

What proportion of the town had thus disappeared no one could tell. It might have been only a few habitations, or the area of acres.

There, perhaps, lay the explanation of the fate of the ancient place. Possibly it had been fully peopled, one day, and, the next, overwhelmed and nearly obliterated by an earthquake, and deserted by its few surviving inhabitants.

Scatter-shot would have found the field a fascinating one for investigation and speculation, but his attention was suddenly drawn away. He noticed a passage at the west side which appeared to lead to a second valley, and lost no time in looking further.

The result surprised him.

The second valley was one containing hundreds of acres, and, in many places, modern grains were waving in the wind. More than that, a town stood not far away, where smoke arose from chimneys, and men and women walked the streets.

It was the home of King Richard's people.

Scatter-shot gazed in wonder; a town of living human creatures was more remarkable than one in ruins.

While he looked a party of horsemen emerged from a timber-belt at the south. He had never seen anything like them. They were clad in gray and orange-lined garments, except that they wore helmets and breastplates of some kind of metal. They carried spears, and strangely recalled the knights of the Dark Ages.

With them were a man and a woman whose dress did not depart from modern style, and all things went to show that the latter were prisoners. At that distance Scatter-shot could tell no more, but he had seen enough to gain a well-defined impression.

The people of the valley must be regarded as enemies until they were proved otherwise.

The band of men in armor entered the town, and he saw them no more. They left a mystery behind them. What was the town? Who were the men? Was it possible that they were descendants of the race whose city lay in ruins in the inner valley? The architecture of the living town was precisely like that of the dead as far as the fashion of the building-stones went, but this, to the explorer's mind, only explained where the missing rocks had gone.

"In any case, it's a good place to avoid," he decided. "Armed as I am with a knife only, I cannot successfully resist them, and I'll keep behind the scenes until I learn more."

The roaring of the falls next attracted his attention, and, impressed with the belief that Roland Ludlow must have taken that course, he ran the risk of exposing himself in the valley, and walked to the stream.

"Jacob's Cataract" was a place of grandeur. The water, already lashed to foam, plunged over a natural dam and, sparkling through many feet of space, fell far below. Beyond, it flowed in form of a quiet river through the valley.

There was no sign of another fall or river, so Scatter-shot was compelled to believe that Ludlow had come over the dam. That he could survive the descent seemed impossible, and the explorer gave him up for lost.

Regarding the location as a good one from which to watch the town, Scatter-shot entered the bushes, found a place to his liking, and settled down to his task.

Helpless and unarmed as he was, he felt the need of aid if he could get it, but he lacked confidence in the unknown people of the valley.

He kept watch for hours. Some fruit was at hand, and this was all he had to eat. The lapse of time gave him no further clew until well past noon. Then two men came up along the river-bank, passed his place of concealment, and went to the foot of the cataract.

There they watched the water for a long time, as if searching for something, but, finally, gave it up and returned. They paused near Scatter-shot and began to talk.

He was pleased to hear the English language. "The capture of the man and the woman," observed one, "is a matter for alarm. For years the outside world has been pressing our way gradually, as town after town has been settled; and the capture of this couple, so near us, shows that folks are venturing around us, more and more."

"They must be stopped," replied the second man.

"How?"

"Ay, how?"

"By death, Mardolph!"

"You forget that we are far less in number than they, Ruric."

"I care not; the race is not always to the swift. We must do or die. Are we to let strangers invade No-World Kingdom, and drive out the Hermit People? No! a thousand times, no! We will fight them to the death! I ask no

greater pleasure than to lay my hands on them!"

And Ruric, who was a fierce-faced fellow, not destitute of intelligence, threw out one of his brawny arms in a dramatic gesture.

"Would you kill the man we took to-day?"

"Ay, that I would!"

"And the girl?"

Ruric made a gesture of scorn.

"Oh! I suppose some of the nobility will claim her as a wife."

"She's pretty."

"What of it? She's of the outside world. I'd kill them all! Let them be fair women or muscular men, they are our natural foes. We kill all the males who wander here, as a rule; so why should the females be spared?"

CHAPTER XII.

PRISONERS TO BE RESCUED.

RURIC was evidently a man of extreme views, but he was not one to be scorned. In neither language, personal appearance nor reality was he a low rough. In fact, to one who knew the practices of the Hermit People it would have been a wonder that, with his intelligence, he wore the gray-and-orange of the warriors, instead of the gray-and-blue of the nobility.

Mardolph seemed to feel his influence, but persisted yet further.

"How are we to keep up our numbers if we kill all who come here?"

"Look ye, the day of the Hermit People will not last forever. We may be good for twenty years, or, perhaps, for fifty, but we shall go down, sooner or later. The outside world advances, and they are our enemies. Since we must die out, why not make the best of our opportunities?"

"How, Ruric?"

"We have treasures here, more valuable than silver or gold. We find the treasures slowly. When we divide our total gains, shall it be among few or among many? Which way will give the greatest gain?"

"To divide with few, of course."

"Then why wonder as to our best course? During the past ten years we have captured five men in, or near, this valley, not counting the recent arrivals. Where are the five?"

"One is a slave; one is a warrior."

"True! Where are the others?"

Mardolph pointed to the river.

"In there!"

"Just so!" Ruric rejoined; "and there they ought all to be. Perish the idea of saving meddlers who come here. Alaric is against it, and so are most of the nobility. King Richard is inclined to be weak, but he dares not defy the will of the majority. I have reason to believe that the latest prisoners will be sunk in the river. The day of sentimental pity is over; the reign of reason has begun."

"And of death!"

"Do you rebel against it?" Ruric asked, fiercely.

"Not I!" Mardolph answered, hastily.

"Then am I not right?"

"You are right."

"And you are convinced?"

"Yes."

"Then see that you make your views known."

Ruric relapsed from gloomy vehemence into a satisfied mood. Mardolph appeared to be, as he had asserted, convinced by his comrade's logic. He had not the appearance of a merciful man, and it was clear that such a feeling had not entered into his opposition to destructive measures.

The two wandered on down the stream, and Scatter-shot again had the vicinity to himself.

He had learned something about the Hermit People—enough to prove that if he revealed himself to them he would do so at some peril. The chances would be very much against his escaping with his life.

All this was discouraging, for he was not properly conditioned to meet the dangers of the hills. As a knife was his only weapon, he could not defend himself against an ordinary enemy, or secure necessary food.

Clearly, however, he must keep out of sight of the Hermit People, and seize upon any possible chance to improve his situation.

The conversation he had heard gave him no inkling to the fact that Roland Ludlow still lived, and he argued the worst from the visit of the men to the falls. He believed that the body of his late comrade had been found, and that the warriors had visited Jacob's Cataract to see if any evidence existed there.

The morning of the next day had come.

Scatter-shot was in the hills, at a point south of No-World Kingdom. The previous night he had slept in a house of the ruined city, and was now engaged in an attempt to get something substantial to eat.

A rock rattled on the acclivity beyond him; he looked up and saw two men descending. His first impulse was to secrete himself, but a second glance caused him to stand still.

It seemed almost impossible, but the men were Alkali Abe and Silent Seth!

He went forward to meet them, when convinced of the fact, and the Game Chicken tossed

his battered hat high in the air as the recognition became responsive.

"Wah! wah!" he roared, lustily.

Scatter-shot made a warning gesture, but did not speak until near enough to make such a course safe.

"Be careful!" he then cautioned. "You are near the worst of foes."

"So we're on ter the critters?" Abe returned.

"What 'critters'?"

"Them who hev got Ariadne an' the little round chap in gay colors."

"Are they again captured?"

"Sartain!"

"Misfortunes go in regiments."

"Don't ye shed nary a tear, comrade; we'll pull out all right. The Game Chicken's wings never drooped yet, an' they won't begin now. Wah! wah! I'm a tough ol' bird, with spurs run like a buzz-saw, an' the way I back up the enemy is hijjus. I ain't no bragger, but it takes more nor one right smart biped ter faze me. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!" agreed the silent scout.

"Come inter some saft nook an' let us hev a confab," Abe added. "We've got grub in our possess which the same we ain't eat yet. It's time, though."

"I agree with you, fully!" the explorer declared.

"Foller me, then!"

The trio, together with the dog, Lazarus, were soon secreted in a thicket, and engaged in eating—a welcome occupation for Scatter-shot.

"We thought ye dead," continued Abe.

"I fear that Ludlow has met that end," the surveyor replied. "I was thrown out of the boat; he went on, and, I fear, perished in the falls."

"That's bad news, fur he was a right likely feller. But I'm glad ter see you; we shall need ye. The young woman, Ariadne, is took prisoner, an' we're bound ter save her."

"Taken by the people of the valley?"

"She was gobbled by the 'Paches first. They tackled us soon after you an' Ludlow went down the river in the boat, the 'Paches did. Seth Mason an' I laid about us like thrashers with flails, an' the reds fell like ripe grain; but we couldn't clean out the whole nation. Seth Mason an' me was killed, an' the 'Paches took Ariadne an' Yoke Laffin'chap captives an' bore them away."

"When the sun riz the next mornin' it shone on our dead bodies with effect. Gradually we showed signs o' resurrection. Fu'st an arm began ter twitch an' then a leg. I s'pose our spirits was erround, shakin' our bodies ter wake us up. How's that, Seth Mason?"

The taciturn borderman aimed a tobacco-shot at the tip of Lazarus's tail with deadly effect, and then gravely replied:

"Kerreck!"

"We come ter life," proceeded Abe, "an' spent the next ten minutes huntin' fur our scalps, only ter diskiver in the end that we had 'em on our heads. We had fell outside the camp, livin' some time after we was dead before we fell, so the 'Paches never knowed thar was scalps right in their grip."

"Wal, we took ter the trail, an' sighted the reds soon after noon. They had Ariadne, Yoke Laffin'feller, the elephant and the hosses; but the elephant finally broke away, an' went nobody knows whar."

"We couldn't tact the 'Paches open, so we follered secret, but, when they camped at night, a party o' whites 'lit on 'em afore we could. Thar was a general rumpuss, in which we took part; but the whites got the two pris'ners an' scooted."

"As soon as 'twas daylight we took the trail, an' hyar we be. Now, kin you prove, or disprove, my belief that the whites is outlaws?"

"They are worse!" Scatter-shot returned.

"Worse? Jabberin' jaguars!"

The explorer proceeded to tell what he knew and suspected about the Hermit People, relating all his adventures since he had left Abe and Seth so unceremoniously.

"By Jericho! this is ser'us!" declared the Game Chicken. "We didn't expect no city in an unknown land, and ain't prepared fer to subdue it. Ef the critters keep a standin' army o' soldiers, all boxed up in armor, they kin most likely beat us out in a fight."

"We must resort to strategy."

"Jes' so, but how?"

"Something may be done by outside observation, but, if necessary, I am ready to undertake a secret journey to the town, to-night, and see what I can learn."

"One on us must do it."

"Any great amount of exposure must be avoided until we can get a suit of clothes like theirs, and I presume the only way to do that is to seize one of their number, and take his away."

"Wal, let's hev a look, anyhow."

Their hunger was satisfied, and they went to an elevated point and, after secreting themselves in the bushes, watched the town.

Much that they saw was strange and interesting, but there was no sign of any prisoners. The reference made by Ruric and Mardolph to a captive man and woman naturally awakened the suspicion that Eudora Redmoor and Allison Blake had also fallen into the Hermit People's

hands, but, look as they might, and did, the scouts saw no familiar form or face.

The fate of all the captives was uncertain.

CHAPTER XIII.

SCATTER-SHOT TAKES A RISKY STEP.

NIGHT had come. A man was passing along the main street of the hidden town. He wore the gray and orange of Alaric's "Legion," but was no follower of the centurion.

It was Scatter-shot, in disguise.

One of the Hermit People had been surprised outside the valley and captured. His peculiar dress had been put on by the explorer, and the latter had entered the town boldly.

He hoped to escape detection, and did not intend to do anything reckless, but it was his purpose to venture enough to make the trip of some value.

With so many recent additions to the number of prisoners, it was to be expected that there would be considerable conversation about them, if he could listen, and learn whether they were confined, one great point would be gained.

Acting upon this idea, Scatter-shot walked into the main street. His manner was easy. Nothing betrayed uneasiness or furtive caution, yet it was as far removed from recklessness. As the streets were dark, he had hopes of escaping notice. No lamps were in the streets, and even the houses appeared to be poorly cared for in this respect.

On his way he met several persons, but none gave any heed to him beyond a casual glance.

Naturally, the big building of the place was a power of attraction, and he went that way. When he arrived no one was to be seen, and he stood looking at it with curiosity.

Evidently, the builders had not intended it to fall easy prey to assailants. No window was nearer than twelve feet to the ground, but the space below had been saved from a barren aspect by ornamenting the plain stone obtained from the ruined city with fanciful designs.

Scatter-shot, however, had no curiosity in regard to the ornamentation. Believing that the prisoners were likely to be inside, he was considering how entrance could best be effected.

While thus occupied he was startled by the sudden opening of the door. Three men came out. Being too late to make successful flight, Scatter-shot stood his ground, hoping, as on the former occasions, to receive only casual attention.

The contrary proved to be the the case. The foremost man looked at him, and then exclaimed.

"Ha! is it you, Theseus?"

Scatter-shot tried to meet the danger carelessly.

"Yes," he answered.

"We were just going to look for you, having been sent by Queen Augusta. She wishes to see you!"

"To see me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That she did not tell us. Probably it is private business."

The explorer stood in irresolution. What was he to do? He did not know who "Queen Augusta" was, but did know that he did not want to enter the building. Detection seemed certain, in that case. But what excuse could he make, or how avoid going? Three stout men, clad all in gray, were before him, and the only way he could oppose their will, if they were disposed to compel obedience, was to take to flight.

And that meant an alarm at the very beginning of the campaign to liberate the prisoners.

"You are that Theseus who belongs to the first brigade of the Legion, are you not?" pursued the previous speaker.

"Yes," recklessly answered Scatter-shot.

"I thought so, but I was told to make sure, for the queen said she did not know you by sight."

"No?"

"Why do you hesitate, Sir Warrior? Our queen is not accustomed to wait."

"I'll go, at once!"

The explorer made the assertion boldly. If the queen did not know him, there was a chance that he would escape detection. If any person was to be present at the interview who did know him, it would seem that such precautions would not have been urged upon the messenger.

The men turned back, and Scatter-shot boldly followed them into the building. He saw a place more like a city business building than a "king's" palace, as it really was; and the efforts to subdue the grim severity of the stones obtained from the ruined city by ornamentation had been only partially successful.

He was conducted up a flight of stairs and along a hall until a certain door was reached. One of the men in gray entered, was gone a few moments, and then returned.

"Please follow," he requested. "The queen will see you at once!"

Again Scatter-shot obeyed. The full comprehension of his reckless venture came to him at that moment, and detection and death seemed certain, but his courage did not fail.

Passing through an ante-room they entered a second which was really furnished richly, many of the articles being of modern style. There sat

a lady who, beyond question, was the queen, surrounded by several female servants in gray.

She looked at the supposed member of the Legion, and then waved her hand at her attendants.

"You will go out, one and all, and remain until I call you," she ordered.

They went, at once.

Scatter-shot stood with bowed head, trying to act as meekly as he supposed a subject naturally would before his sovereign, but keeping his face away from the light.

"Your name!" the queen commanded.

"It is Theseus, your Majesty," he replied, very respectfully.

"Turn your face toward the lamp!"

It was a disagreeable order, but it had to be obeyed. He turned, and the queen studied his countenance with the keenest attention. He was alarmed. Why should she act thus unless she was suspicious? Worse than the rifles of outlaws or Apaches were Queen Augusta's eyes, but her intent regard suddenly relaxed.

"Sit down!" she directed, pointing to a chair.

He did as directed. By this time he had been allowed time to see what this mountain queen was like, and he did not find her either royal or beautiful of appearance.

She was about forty years old. She could never have been a handsome woman, though she might once have been pretty, in a delicate way. The years had done her no good. She was spare of flesh almost to the point of emaciation, her face being hollow, and her cheek-bones very prominent. She was simply a very plain-looking woman of middle age, upon whose face time, dissatisfaction, restlessness and suspicion had marked deep lines.

To off-set these she had gone to an extreme in attire. Her dress was silk and of a color not suited to her age. Diamonds glittered wherever they could be worn—at her ears, in her hair, at her neck, and in the profusion of rings that covered her bony fingers.

Scatter-shot saw all this, and thought her a woman of vulgar taste. He had yet to learn her nature. He did not know how moody, jealous and unhappy that nature was, or how it had urged its possessor on from suspicion to the brink of crime.

Again she regarded the counterfeit Theseus closely.

"You look like a bold man," she remarked.

"Thank you, your Majesty."

"You have been represented to me as such, too."

He bowed low.

"The question is, are you willing to serve your queen?"

"Can you doubt it?"

"What if, by such services, you run contrary to others?"

"You are the queen!"

"And Richard is the king!"

"True," Scatter-shot assented, vaguely.

"Suppose you run contrary to him?"

The explorer looked the royal lady full in the face. There was marked meaning in her voice and manner, and he began to understand that, to use an old expression, "something was afoot." What was it?

"You would still be the queen," he replied, diplomatically.

"I think we understand each other, Theseus, but it is necessary to speak plainly. Would you—to please me—if paid for it well—do that which you knew would be contrary to King Richard's wishes?"

Her eyes gleamed unpleasantly as she eagerly awaited his reply. He hesitated, as well as he might. Finally, he made answer:

"I think I may safely promise, your Majesty."

"And why 'safely'?"

It was upon his lips to render a compliment to her possible uprightness, but, just in time, he decided that that subject was just the one that the queen would wish to avoid.

"Because," he returned, "I think your Majesty would stand by her subject."

"So I would."

"Then count upon me!"

"I'll trust you fully; I am sure that I am not deceived. Know you of a person called Ilzarra?"

"No."

He half regretted the reply as soon as it was made. Had he erred? Had the real Theseus ought to know her?

"That person," Queen Augusta went on, her eyes glittering with fierce light, "is a member of this household. Your work in my behalf concerns her."

"What do you wish, your Majesty?"

"I want you to kill her!"

CHAPTER XIV.

WANTED: AN ASSASSIN!

SCATTER-SHOT gazed at the speaker in startled surprise. When he took the identity of the gray-and-orange warrior he had not anticipated being brought into such a position as this. Cool man of the world, and experienced in adventure as he was, he could not hear the proposition without horror.

Queen Augusta appeared to misunderstand the emotion he manifested.

"You are surprised, and it is not to be wondered at," she pursued, firmly. "You naturally inquire, in your mind, why it is that King Richard does not have charge of a radical deed to be done in his own palace. Your answer will be found in what I said before—the king is not to know of it."

"Who is this Ilzarra?" Scatter-shot asked, trying to hide the aversion he felt to the woman.

"You shall hear. It is right that you should know all, for I am asking you to take a very radical step, as I said before. Yet—do you hesitate?"

"I do not forget that you are the queen."

"Well said, faithful Theseus. You shall lose nothing by your faithfulness. Know, then, that this Ilzarra is a female captive in this palace who has caused me much misery. At the start our good centurion, Alaric, claimed her for his wife, under the laws of our people, but she is still unmarried."

The speaker paused, and her furrowed face grew hard and drawn, making her look like an old woman.

"The girl objected," she continued, "and King Richard bade Alaric give her time, alleging that she would consent after awhile. If he believed what he said, he was mistaken; she did not consent; she has never consented."

"Now, Alaric has put his request in the form of a demand, but he seems as far from success as ever; the king has promised, but he has done that before."

"I have never been at a loss to know why, sparing no one else, he spared Ilzarra. The laws of the Hermit People allow no plurality of wives, and Richard cannot take this Ilzarra while I live, but he loves her, nevertheless!"

A tremor shook the queen's frame, and the numerous diamonds danced and sent out gleams of light like the sparkle of the Evil Eye.

"I have accused him many times!" she pursued, her voice rising to a shrill pitch, "and he has always denied the truth, but I am not to be deceived. I know all! He loves her, and that is why he has stood in Alaric's way. He has kept her here, loved her, visited her—ugh! my flesh creeps when I think how I have been imposed upon—what I have permitted to go on!"

Scatter-shot moved uneasily. He saw more clearly, at last; he realized that there was before him a miserable, jealous woman, consumed by the fire of her own suspicions and hatred. He did not undertake to say anything.

"I have endured it as long as I will," she resumed. "My remonstrances, pleadings and threats have alike been in vain. Now, I am going to resort to sterner measures; I will not submit to this monstrous wrong. Among our people there is no law of divorce, but I can furnish law enough for this case. Ilzarra shall die!"

The woman clinched her fingers upon the velvet-covered arm of her chair until the cords rose sharply on the back of her hand, and, to the explorer, her voice was like the hiss of a serpent.

Suddenly, she turned again to her companion. "Have I been correctly informed regarding you?" she demanded.

"What were you told?"

"That you were a bold, free man who had never surrendered his independence of spirit for the king's sake."

"Who told you this?"

"Diane, that one of my maids who was killed by the accident a week ago. You remember her, do you not?"

"Yes."

"She loved you?"

"Poor girl!" sighed Scatter-shot, at a venture.

"She is not alive to recommend you now, but she did it before. She knew more of my wrongs, and my feelings, than any one else. She knew what I must come to, and advised me accordingly. Now, consider what I ask of you: it is not that you will be faithful to the Hermit People nor yet to King Richard; but simply that you will remove from his path a temptation which is making him false to himself, to his legal wife, and to his people."

"Well said, your Majesty."

"May I, then, rely upon you?"

"When is this work to be done?"

"To-night?"

"To-night?"

"Yes."

Scatter-shot's face seemed to creep. It was no trifling matter to come to do such a fearful deed, even if it did not intend to keep the compact.

He had, with the audacity of genius, arising unbidden, however, thought that by telling the queen's project he might get the liberty of the palace to see an expert that he could release all the captives, but doubts and fears began to rise.

He knew that he had only about one chance of success in a hundred.

"How?" he asked, uneasily.

"You have a knife?"

"Yes."

"I'll guide you to her room, myself."

"Now"

"A little later, when the palace has grown quieter; when this evil Ilzarra is asleep."

"Will you not be suspected?"

"I'll take the risk. Let them know it, if they wish; I am not afraid or ashamed to have it known. I work only for my honor, and am willing to rest my cause with the people. Your share, worthy Theseus, shall not be known; I'll stand by you in all things, and your pay shall be princely."

She arose, unlocked a drawer, took out a small box and opened it before him.

Its interior blazed with diamonds.

"Will that pay you?"

"Yes."

"Is the bargain made?"

"Yes!"

She replaced the diamonds.

"They shall be yours when the work is done," she promised.

Resuming her seat, she outlined her plan. Many of the "slaves," or servants, in the palace were devoted to her, and she would not need to trust any one of whom she had a doubt. The deed could be done secretly and quickly, after which the supposed Theseus would go away, of course. It would be impossible, the queen asserted, to bring proof against any one.

Scatter-shot was in a state of great uncertainty. How was he to act? Once, he thought of trying some artifice by which Alkali Abe and Silent Seth could be introduced to the house, and a general rescue made possible, but the game was already risky enough. To make it more cumbersome would be to invite failure through discovery.

But what could he do alone?

What course was he to take when he was led to the mysterious Ilzarra?

When he declined to keep the infamous compact, would hope of rescue remain?

If the unknown Ilzarra was an unhappy prisoner she would grasp at any chance, but what of the queen? Could she be prevented from giving an alarm, when she saw her purchased ally play her false?

And if Ilzarra was rescued, could Ariadne and the other captives be saved, also?

The maids were recalled to the room, but he was not sent out. These young women he found to be of average comeliness. They looked demure and Quakerlike in their gray suits, and were very attentive to the queen; but they found time to send occasional glances toward the false, but handsome, Theseus.

It was the law of the Hermit People that if a man married out of his own rank in social life his wife came to his level, whether it was upward or the reverse, and the gray slaves would not have refused the chance to add orange to their solemn gray, or to have the other benefits of rising a degree in life.

But Scatter-shot was oblivious to their admiring glances.

Weightier matters occupied his time, and he who had fearlessly faced Apaches, outlaws, and the various wild animals of the Far West, found himself strangely nervous in this crisis. When he had carelessly promised his friend, the Government officer, to look over the topographical features of the hills, he little suspected what other features he would meet.

At the end of an hour Queen Augusta rose and nodded to the surveyor.

"Follow me!" she directed, in a matter-of-fact way.

He obeyed, and she paused in the ante-room to give further direction.

"We shall enter this Ilzarra's room secretly," she explained. "It is not known that I have a key to the door, but such is the fact. I shall do all the work until a certain point is reached; then I depend upon your strong arm!"

"Lead on!" Scatter-shot answered.

The queen obeyed. They went to the hall, thence along to the left until a certain door was reached. Then she fitted the key with remarkable caution, turned the lock and pushed back the sole obstacle.

The explorer was growing calmer as the crisis approached, and the queen had no reason to complain of backwardness on his part.

A light was burning dimly, and, when Augusta touched his arm and pointed, he did not fail to detect what was meant.

He saw a bed, with a human form upon it!

CHAPTER XV.

THE PERIL OF TWO LIVES.

SCATTER-SHOT'S companion pointed to the silent form and spoke one word in a whisper:

"Strike!"

The explorer's knife was in his hand, but the unknown woman had no more cause to fear it than had a person a hundred miles away. In his opinion, the time had come to make a revelation, and he was about to turn upon Queen Augusta and command silence when the second woman leaped from the bed.

One turn of her hand sent the light up to its full brightness, and the trio stood revealed to each other. Clearly the unknown had not been sleeping. She had lain down without disrobing, expecting danger perhaps.

The picture then presented to her was most startling.

There stood the revengful queen; there stood Scatter-shot, knife in hand, looking, no doubt, like a veritable assassin. Certainly, the sight made the girl turn white, and she gazed with eyes dilated with horror.

Scatter-shot, too, was the victim of surprise and alarm. The girl was no stranger, but Eudora Redmoor!

The queen was dismayed, but fear of discovery gave place to other emotions when she saw that the prisoner was not the hated Ilzarra.

"The wrong woman!" she gasped.

Eudora did not grasp the meaning of the words, but their sound aroused her to new life. She clasped her hands imploringly.

"Spare me! spare me!" she whispered, huskily.

The surveyor made a gesture, anxious to convey comprehension of the situation to her mind, and thereby avoid exposure which would be fatal to both her and himself, but she only fell upon her knees and repeated:

"Spare me! spare me!"

And the voice of the queen came with a second echo:

"The wrong woman!"

"Then we don't want anything of *this* one?" quickly added Scatter-shot, for Eudora's ears.

"No."

"Shall we go?"

"Wait! I want light. Girl, get up!" she added, harshly.

Eudora did not rise, but it began to dawn upon her that some hope remained. She had given no evidence of having recognized the explorer; she now looked at Queen Augusta, only.

"Spare me!" she feebly reiterated.

"Girl, why are you here?" the queen demanded.

"They put me here."

"Who?"

"I don't know; those who had charge."

"Where is the other woman?"

"What other woman?"

"The one who belongs in this room."

"I don't know; nobody has been here since they put me in."

The queen made an angry gesture.

"I see how it is. They suspect me, and have taken the girl elsewhere. Or—can Richard have resolved to show his purpose plainly, and have taken the girl to himself? If so, there may be daggers aimed at me—at me, the old, the hated, the cast-off wife!"

She pressed her hands to her temples, as if she saw a vision like Macbeth's.

Scatter-shot was nervous and anxious to get away. The armed neutrality existing between him and Eudora was open to doubt. Was she, really, his enemy or not? If the former possibility was true, she might betray him as soon as she perceived who he was. He turned his back, trusting that the uniform of gray and orange would be a disguise in the future as it had thus far been against her eyes.

Suddenly Eudora's expression changed.

"Can you tell me who else had a room on this side of the building?" she asked.

Augusta aroused, but only regarded her vaguely.

"When I was brought into this town," Eudora went on, eagerly, "I saw a face at a window which startled me so that I fainted. It must have been near here. Will you tell me the name of—"

"Nonsense!" Augusta brusquely interrupted.

"What do I care about your swoons and your faces? Be satisfied that you live. Come, Theseus!"

The latter was not slow to obey. He preceded the queen to the door, taking care that Eudora had no better view of him. If it had been Ariadne, instead, he would have held to his original purpose of trying to overpower the queen, but he was not convinced that Eudora was his friend.

There was reason to believe that, in the past, she had been his bitter enemy.

They went out, and Augusta relocked the door.

"Foiled!" she muttered, bitterly.

"What are we to do now?" Scatter-shot asked.

"I don't know."

"Why not open other doors?"

"I have no key to them."

"Can't they be opened, somehow?"

"That is what I am trying to decide. But how?—how?"

The explorer watched her eagerly while she knit her brows in deep thought. He had forgotten that she was a so-called queen, and no longer applied any title of homage to her; he saw only a dangerously jealous woman whose revengful spirit, he hoped, might be turned to his advantage.

"I'll try it!" she finally exclaimed.

"What?"

"The key to *that* woman's room must be in King Richard's apartment. I'll go there, and find it if I can! No doubt, he will kill me if I am discovered, but I will run the risk. Go you to the ante-room, Theseus, and wait for me. I'll return with the keys, or No-World Kingdom shall see a dead queen before another sun sets. I wonder if the execution will be private, or public?"

For a moment the caricature of a smile hovered upon her worn face, but it soon passed. Again came the scowl which had marked the untimely lines upon her face, and she moved toward King Richard's room.

Scatter-shot entered the ante-room and remained in a state of painful suspense.

The jealous wife had no barrier in her way, this time. She possessed a key to the king's ante-room, and she fitted it to the lock and entered. The door beyond was not fastened. She opened it, and stood in King Richard's presence.

A light was burning.

The ruler of No-World Kingdom lay upon the bed, fully dressed, but asleep. His condition and position would have suggested to a disinterested mind that, weary and discontented, he had thrown himself down without regard to order, so miserable was his state of mind, but Augusta could draw conclusions to but one end.

She gave the strong form and powerful face but a single glance, and then proceeded to look for keys. None met her gaze, and she searched in vain. While thus occupied she heard a sound which arrested her movements abruptly.

The king was muttering in his sleep. She hastened to his bedside and listened.

He moved restlessly.

"Poor child! poor child!" he muttered.

Augusta's face grew dark with fresh passion.

"He shall not have her!" the sleeping man observed, his voice growing stronger. "Alaric is a mere ruffian—a murderer! Shall he have one like her? Never! never!"

"No!" hissed the queen. "Death shall be her bridegroom!"

"I will protect her!" added Richard.

"So will the grave!" the queen supplemented.

"I love the child! She is dearer to me than life!" pursued the luckless sleeper.

The almost-maddened wife looked about, saw a knife, seized it and stood over her husband.

"How much longer must I keep on the mask?" muttered the king; "how much longer deceive them?"

"You don't deceive me, now!" sibilated Augusta.

She had not attempted to carry out her momentary impulse to use the knife. She now waited to hear more, but the sleeper was silent for some time, though he moved restlessly. Finally his muttering again began.

"Who is it that approaches her? Is it friend or foe? What means the knife in the strange woman's hand? Ha! it is Augusta, and she intends to murder the girl! Awake! Ilzarra! Ilzarra!"

The king sprung to the floor so suddenly that Augusta barely avoided a collision. He then stood in horror and bewilderment. The perspiration upon his forehead, the wild aspect of his eyes, and the contortion of his features alike told how his dream had alarmed him. And when he knew that it was no more than a dream, the reality of the woman and the knife was not a pleasant sight.

It had double significance at that juncture, when he had just dreamed of the queen, knife in hand, bent upon murder.

She stood in cold and unwavering silence until he found his voice again.

"You, here!" he muttered.

"Yes," she replied, coolly.

"What do you want?" he added, his gaze wandering again to the knife.

"I have been listening while you babbled your dreams in audible words."

"My dreams!" he echoed, with a start.

"Ay; your sleeping visions of Ilzarra."

"Ilzarra!" muttered the king.

"Yes, your loved one."

"Pardon me, Augusta, but you talk at random—"

"You did not talk at random, but to the point. You have lied to me in the past, but, to-night, you spoke the truth. You confessed your base love for Ilzarra!"

CHAPTER XVI.

NEW WORK FOR SCATTER-SHOT.

RICHARD'S alarm had faded away, but, in its place, there was deep trouble and dismay.

"You jest, Augusta!" he returned.

"I speak the truth," the queen retorted.

"You muttered of Ilzarra like a love-lorn boy of twenty-one years; you praised her bright eyes, her peerlessly beautiful face, her sweet smile, her regal form; you vowed you would die for her—that you adored her, and her, only!"

"Impossible!" almost groaned the perturbed king.

"Why did you awaken in such terror? Dare you deny that you thought some one was creeping upon your lady-love, knife in hand, to kill her? Or dare you deny that I was the fiend of your dream, as I am of your waking hours? Or will you deny that you called upon Ilzarra to awake, and crying, yourself awoke in a panic?"

Harsh and bitter was the queen's voice, and she was driving every word home as if they were arrows sent to his heart.

He could no longer doubt that she had overheard something.

"Possibly," she added, with sarcasm, "you will still deny your love for that wretched woman?"

King Richard pointed to a chair.

"Pray be seated."

"Not in your presence, traitor!"

He ignored the bitter retort as he had ignored the knife. Naturally, he placed a worse construction upon the latter incident than facts justified. Not knowing of the vain search for the keys, or that his own luckless muttering had led the jealous wife to seize the weapon in sudden fury, he could only infer that she had come there with designs upon his life.

All these things he passed over, however.

"You should not condemn any one by the vague shadows of a dream," he urged, pacifically. "What is a dream, anyhow? A picture of unreal life, always without methods, and generally absurd—"

"There was method in *your* dream!" Augusta cried; "so much method that you betrayed your guilty secret."

"You wrong me—"

"Dare you deny it still?"

"I deny it. Ilzarra is nothing to me—"

"It is false! You said in plain words that you loved her!"

"Are your dreams always true to life?"

"I am not on trial. You are, and you stand condemned."

"Perhaps you will believe me when the girl is Alaric's wife—"

"That she will never be. You declared as much while sleeping, and I have known the truth all along. You don't intend to let him have her; you love her, yourself, and are bound to marry her. You have tired of your own wife, now that she is growing old, and seek a young and beautiful bride. Your lies will save you no longer; you have told the truth unconsciously."

"I swear that you wrong me, Augusta!"

"Then why have you interfered for her, making Alaric wait two years, when you never tried to save any other girl who was brought here?"

"Because I thought she would yield, sooner or later," the king weakly replied.

"Oh! and why wasn't she compelled to yield at once, as others have been?"

"The wives of our leaders should be satisfied. On that depends the prosperity of our people."

"Fool! fool! How you cling to your feeble lies, and seek to bolster them up with childish arguments! Spend no more breath; I am not so idiotic as to believe."

"You shall be convinced."

"How?"

"The girl shall marry Alaric quickly."

"Or elope with *you*!"

"Never!"

"Why did you have her moved to another room?"

King Richard's eyes suddenly grew keen and suspicious.

"How did you know she had been changed?" he demanded.

"Why shouldn't I know? Why should I be ignorant of all that occurs in this house?"

The king's gaze wandered to the knife in his wife's hand. She tossed it upon the bed beside him.

"If you want to kill me, now is your time!" she exclaimed, almost hysterically.

"Augusta, you wound me deeply. Why should I wish to do harm to my own wife? Wait—hear me through! I chose you from among all other women when we were both young. You say you are growing old, now. Am I not, too? Am I not six years your senior?"

"Ah! but old men marry young wives!"

"That I shall never do. I feel that I have no right, even if I were so inclined, to ask another woman to share my lot. Whatever we may say in our own defense, we cannot deny, in moments of candor, that we have perpetuated our kingdom in blood. Crime and assassination have attended us year by year, and upon my head rests the chief blame, for I am the Hermit People's so-called king. But in all my life of evil-doing I have not forgotten that you are my legal wife, or ceased to love you, or dreamed of caring for another. Augusta, will you not believe me, banish your groundless suspicions, and let our old life be restored?"

The king spoke earnestly, and with sincerity. All he had said was strictly true.

"Criminal that he was, he had never deserved his wife's reproaches."

But jealousy is never open to reason, and a bitter smile attested to her unbelief.

"You talk well, but I know you of old. I decline to be deceived."

Richard was silent; he had made his plea, and had no more to say. The queen watched him in a critical way for awhile, and then, seeing that he did not intend to speak further, added:

"I have shown you that I am not blind: in the future I will still give further evidence of discernment."

She turned and left the room. He appeared scarcely conscious of her movements, and, when the door closed, was standing with lowered head, looking at the floor like one in a dream.

Augusta went at once to the ante-room where Scatter-shot awaited her return.

"Foiled, again!" she exclaimed. "I have not been able to get the keys, and the chances are that any effort we might make, to-night, would be worse than useless. We will not try it."

Return to your proper place, Theseus, and, when I want you again, I will send for you."

"Yes, your Majesty," the explorer replied.

"I will learn to what room the girl has been transferred— Wait!"

She paused, meditated, and a look of fresh malevolence overspread her face.

"Why didn't I think of it before?" she cried.

"The reason why that Ilzarra was not in her room is as plain as day. The veriest clod ought to read it. The king is about to elope with her!"

Scatter-shot did not venture an opinion.

"I see it all, now!" declared the unhappy victim of her own concoctions. "They are sly, but I am not the weakling they think me. This is the night set for the work!"

Still the counterfeit Theseus remained quiet.

"But I'll foil them; I'll foil them!" Augusta declared, beating her own bosom in a passion. "I'll detect them in the act. Theseus!"

"Yes, your Majesty!"

"You are not to go, yet. I'll place you at the rear exit, where, I feel sure, they will go out, and you shall watch. As for me, Richard is shrewd, and it is best that I should be in my own apartments, but, upon the least suspicious sign, you are to come to me."

"I understand."

"Will you do the work?"

"Certainly."

"Faithfully?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Then follow me, again."

She led the way to the lower floor, at the rear of the building, and showed him where he could secrete himself near the exit. The plan was so greatly in his favor that he could scarcely believe his good fortune.

Augusta left him, and he was free, as far as he could see, from all prying and unfriendly eyes. He had the liberty of the palace, just what he had most desired.

He waited and meditated. Somewhere in the building, he believed, were Eudora, Ariadne, the mysterious Ilzarra, Yorick Laflingman and Allison Blake. The latter did not interest him, and, indeed, he would have been most reluctant to free him, but the others he was anxious to rescue.

How could it be done?

The queen had professed an inability to open any of the doors—how was he to do it?

If he had known where the captives were he could have tried the doubtful experiment of rapping upon their doors, but then was danger in the plan, and, of all the party, he only knew the room of Eudora—a woman whom he hesitated to trust.

It was not an enviable state of affairs, but, as the chances were very much against his ever again having the liberty of the palace, he decided to take the only step open to him.

This was to release Eudora, first of all, and learn if she knew where her companion-prisoners were.

Having decided upon this point, he reascended the stairs. The hall was perfectly dark, and he moved cautiously through it, seeking for Eudora's room, and hoping that no unfortunate encounter would occur.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE STREET.

SCATTER-SHOT paused suddenly.

A sound had fallen upon his ears which at once aroused suspicion.

He listened attentively.

Some one was moving in the hall; he could hear slow, stealthy footsteps.

Afraid of being discovered, he crouched down near the wall and waited for the unknown to pass. In any case he was in danger, while if, as he suspected, it was Queen Augusta, prowling about to satisfy her consuming jealousy, he would be no better off.

Nearer came the stealthy mover—so near that Scatter-shot could have touched that person. But worse was to come. Just as the unknown seemed about to pass, the explorer became conscious that there was danger of a collision.

He started to move, but too late.

The other person ran full upon him.

Finding that it was a man, Scatter-shot did not hesitate as to his course. He seized his unwelcome neighbor, and proceeded to overpower him.

He had undertaken no small task. The unknown was quite ready for the grapple, and they began to struggle as if their lives depended upon it. Neither had been upright at the start, and they quickly sunk to the floor.

There the fight, was continued, both putting forth every effort.

Scatter-shot found that he had caught a worthy adversary, but he had seldom met his match. He had not in this case, and he finally succeeded in rolling the man over upon his back and holding him there.

"Yield!" he commanded.

"Is that all you want?" returned a cool voice. "Why didn't you mention it before? I'm an accommodating man, and like to oblige."

"Who are you?" the surveyor demanded, more forcibly.

"Look on the programme, if you want my name."

"Roland Ludlow—alive!"
 "Bruised and scarred, but still in the ring."
 "Don't you know me?"
 "Your voice is familiar, but—"
 "I am Scatter-shot."
 "Great Scott! why didn't I see it before?"
 The victor assisted the ex-King of the Trapeze to his feet.

"I am amazed to find you alive," he asserted, "but this is no time to talk of the past. Are you a prisoner here?"

"I have been, but I'm aiming to escape."
 "Do you know where the other prisoners are?"
 "Who?"

"Ariadne, Laffingman, Eudora and Blake."
 "So they're all here? I thought as much. And there is one more captive; a girl called Ilzarra. I've seen her, and promised to get her free."

"Can you do it?"
 "I was just going to her room—I think the door is that, yonder."

"She has been taken away; the present occupant is Eudora Redmoor. Where Ilzarra is, I don't know. But, Ludlow, we must do wholesale work, and rescue all of them."

"I'm your chimpanzee. Show me how!"
 All this had been said hastily. Consultation was continued, and it transpired that Roland thought he knew where Ariadne and Laffingman were, but, beyond what he knew of Ilzarra, he could tell no more.

If Ilzarra had been moved, it looked as if the enemy had become suspicious, and thwarted them in advance. So he reasoned, but Scatter-shot believed that he knew a better cause for Ilzarra's removal.

Both the men were eager to effect a general rescue, but they were not sanguine of their ability to do so. The chances were against their being able to rouse their friends without making noise enough to alarm the other occupants of the palace, and the result of such a mishap might be fatal to all.

Nevertheless, it must be tried.
 First of all, they went to the door of the room where Ariadne was believed to be, and Ludlow uttered her name at the keyhole in a low voice. It was not expected that any good would result therefrom, but, to their great satisfaction, a reply came at once.

"Who is there?"
 "Friends."
 "Speak your names!"
 "Roland Ludlow."

There was an exclamation within, and then the lock clicked and the door opened. A female form was before them, and they were not long in discovering that it was Ariadne.

"Oh! take me away!" she said, breathlessly.
 "Where are the other prisoners?"
 "I don't know."

"Will this key open other doors?"
 "I don't know. A female servant dropped it by accident, and I pulled a rug over it, at once. It escaped her notice. There must be another key to this door, for she found one to lock it. Who else is here? I may be a coward, but I am in terrible fear; I want to get away!"

The speaker's voice was unsteady, and they could see her tremble. Plainly, the palace was a house of horrors to her.

The rescuers could not be deaf to the needs of the remaining prisoners, and, when satisfied that Ariadne could not tell where the other keys were, they tried the one they already had at hand upon the next door. It proved successful, and Yorick Laffingman was found within, almost paralyzed with fright.

This was their last triumph. The next two doors did not yield to the key, and the attempt upon the third brought an alarm. A deep voice roared out a demand to know who was there, and then some one was heard to leap out of bed.

Plainly, so explosive a person could not be one of the prisoners, and the trio beat a retreat.

The unknown opened the door and shouted his inquiry again, but, getting no answer, suddenly turned up the light.

Scatter-shot and his companions had avoided leaving the palace entirely, hoping the belligerent person would quiet down, but he now caught sight of them and impetuously fired a shot from a revolver after them.

It missed, but they had only one thing left to do, then.

They fled from the palace.

The alarm spread quickly. Lights flashed up in various places over the building, and a bell sent out a deep-toned warning.

Scatter-shot, Ludlow, Ariadne and Yorick were making all haste to get out of the town, but they were not to go tamely.

Suddenly they found their way barred by men whom it was not hard to distinguish as warriors of Alaric's "Legion."

"Halt!" cried one of the strangers. "Make yourselves known, or surrender!"

"Go in!" exclaimed Scatter-shot, briefly; and he then felled the nearest man.

He had given Ludlow one of the revolvers he had kept in his possession when he went to the palace, but, well aware that the sound of firing would arouse even more enemies, the explorer was reluctant to fire.

Both he and Roland attacked the warriors with impetuosity, and blows were given and received rapidly. The odds were against them, and he was just thinking that they would have to resort to the revolvers, when there was a new diversion.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" cried a heavy voice, "what'sort of a jamboree hev we hyar? Reg'lar battle, ain't it, Seth Mason? What! By Jericho! it's our lost comrade. Wade in, an' hew yer bigness!"

And Alkali Abe and Silent Seth sprung into the midst of the warriors, and began to give telling strokes for the defense.

The odds of strength thus turned, the struggle was soon over. Some of the Legion men were down; the others took to flight.

But, by that time, the whole town was arousing. Lights flashed here and there, and the bell kept up its clangor.

"Jabberin' jaguars! we hev got ter skip or be gobbled!" the Game Chicken declared. "Foller me!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SEARCH OF THE LEGION.

ALKALI ABE swept a comprehensive glance around. Their natural course was toward the south, but in that direction extended the main street. To follow it would have been to invite fresh attack, and the borderman did not fail to see the necessity of avoiding it.

Toward the east lay the valley where Scatter-shot had found the ruined city, and their chances were good for escaping in that direction.

"Toddle at my heels!" he added, catching Ariadne by the arm, and the retreat began.

Yorick Laffingman proved to be the weakling of the party. He was so frightened that he could hardly move, but Seth and Scatter-shot seized hold of him and dragged him along.

Abe's device took them away from the houses at once, and they had an open course along the river, up across the field. The tumult increased behind them, but not a person appeared to oppose them, or to announce which way they had gone.

Rapid progress soon took them to the entrance to the second valley, where they paused to breathe.

"The town is all ablaze!" exclaimed Roland.

"Let 'em blaze!" the Game Chicken chuckled.

"They ain't got no prey named like we be. We pulled ye out like brands from the burnin', by Jericho! Scatter-shot, Seth Mason an' I had concluded you was gobbled, an' we come ter make 'rangements fur yer funeral obsequiousnesses."

"It's lucky for us you did."

"Some o' the enemy got sore heads, I reckon. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"Are we doing wisely to come here?" asked Scatter-shot.

"Why not?"

"We are on the north side of the canyon; our horses are on the south."

"I'll risk them, an' I'll risk us. We can't leave these parts at present, nohow. The 'Paches are mortal thick along the trail, an' a straight flight would put us open ter trouble from them an' the white scamps. We had better hide awhile."

"I favor that, for there are other prisoners to be rescued."

"Who?"

"Eudora Redmoor and Allison Blake—"

"Dunno as I want ter risk much fur their sakes," grumbled the Game Chicken.

"Like you, I am not infatuated with them. I believe that Blake is a scoundrel, and Eudora is not beyond suspicion. I trust, however, that she is not so evil as we might suspect. Then there is another prisoner; a girl called Ilzarra."

"And she's more beautiful than any damsel of mythology!" Roland declared.

"We'll rescue 'em all. Jabberin' jaguars! yes; we ain't goin' away ter leave decent folks with snakes. 'Tain't our way. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"We shall all be killed if we stay," lamented Yorick. "Those monsters wil find and slay us. Let us go away, sir; let us go!"

"Nary go!" declared Abe, stoutly.

"Oh, oh! we shall be killed!" groaned Laffingman.

"Brace up, my boy!" cheerfully advised Ludlow. "Don't get in the dumps! Where are your hoary-headed jokes of the ring? Give us a few! Or have you forgotten them in your panic? 'Alas, poor Yorick! Where be your gibes now? your gambols? your songs? your flashes of merriment? Old fellow, you'll have to change your name from Laffingman to Sad-boy!"

Yorick's only reply was a groan.

"In my opinion," pursued Alkali Abe, "we shall do wal ter hide in that ruined city you tell us on. Ef rooms are thar as you described, we kin find shelter, an' it won't be the easiest thing out ter find us."

"Your idea is good," Scatter-shot answered.

"Then let's look fur quarters at once. Some o' the enemy may come this way. Jabberin' jaguars! ain't they stirred up right smart!"

Nearly every dwelling in the town showed a light, and the king's palace was fully lighted.

"They must know of the escapes before now," Scatter-shot admitted, "and search-parties of the Legion probably will be sent out. To our hiding-place seems to be a wise course."

"Lead on!"

It was only a few steps to the ruins, but the selection of a judicious hiding-place was no easy matter. The walls, broken or intact, as the case might be, rose before them in every conceivable form; but where one instance of order had been preserved, there were dozens of wild confusion.

If no enemy had been near they could have found a comfortable room, or series of rooms, and then have settled down, but they had now to look for a place where they could avoid the Hermit People, in case they were hunted for closely.

While the others went to do this, Silent Seth remained where he could see the whole of the larger valley, to watch the movements of the foe.

He saw enough to have excited a man less phlegmatic, but he did not lose his remarkable coolness for a moment.

The town had grown somewhat more quiet, and a large crowd had gathered in front of the palace. It was not hard to surmise that the leaders were in consultation.

How much of the truth would they learn?

After awhile the result of the conference became apparent. A number of men gathered at one side, and, even at that distance, the watchful borderman could distinguish the helmets and breast-plates which went to make up the absurd equipment of Alaric's Legion.

Horses were brought; they mounted and rode away toward the south.

Silent Seth beheld without a shadow of a smile, or a word of satisfaction. Whether this eccentric man was human enough to exult, even mildly, over the fact that the Legion was on the wrong trail must forever remain a mystery.

He rolled his super-abundance of tobacco in his mouth and gave no sign of ordinary feeling.

The Legion acquitted itself nobly. Led by fierce Alaric they rode furiously through the valley to the hills. There they disappeared for awhile, but searching among the canyons, rocks and bushes by night was very much like a game of chance with all the chances on the other side, and they returned.

Next, they rode directly toward Silent Seth.

He rolled his tobacco and, perched upon a high pointed, view them calmly. They came so close that he could have flung a pebble into their midst, but did not enter the valley of the ruined city.

Instead, they kept on in a circuitous route, as if to ride around the valley.

They were just receding when Alkali Abe and Scatter-shot arrived.

"Hullo!" quoth the former, "the boss, foot an' artillery is out, ain't it? Right smart show, they make, though I must say they remind me of the Legion that was last heard on in the drove o' swine, told of in Scripture. Clatter on, ye critters! you ain't got our squad, yet. Jabberin' jaguars! there would be somethin' mighty funny in them chaps ef there wa'n't so much reel cussedness under it all!"

"Look to their left, Abe," directed Scatter-shot. "Do you see that large, moving object?"

"I do, that. Looks like a mountain on legs!"

"I suspect that it is a mountain of flesh."

"The elephant, by thunder!"

"So I analyze it. If not Babel, what is it?"

The men of the Legion had discovered the object, too. They halted and looked, and it was not hard to believe that they looked in wonder. Then one of them raised a rifle—their spears were not carried on this occasion—and sent a bullet toward the object of curiosity.

Whether it struck or not, it had effect in one way. It angered Babel, and he at once trumpeted in rage. Then he dashed at them as fast as he could move his huge body.

"Hi-yi!" cried the Game Chicken, "hyar we hev fun. The 'tarnal critter is on a rampage, an' I'll bet he licks the whole Legion. Yah-whoop!"

But the Legion did not wait to be whipped. The elephant's size and his trumpeting frightened the horses nearly out of their senses. They turned and fled toward the town, and there was no sign that the riders tried to restrain them.

But Babel was not satisfied; he was angry, and his big heart thirsted for revenge.

He pursued, and, as the discomfited warriors fled, his heavy steps sounded behind them.

A little later they rode into the main street, still in a panic. The panic was destined to spread. The people were on the street, and, as they looked in wonder to see the cause of their bold riders' rout, they were dumfounded to behold Babel charging upon them.

An elephant in that region was a novelty. Some, indeed, had never seen one anywhere, and those who had, and knew what to understand, were not prepared for Babel's appearance then.

Still trumpeting his rage the animal charged the crowd.

No one tried to stand before him. All fled in terror, but not always with success. They ran

against each other, fell down, and tumbled around like ten-pins smitten by a heavy hand.

Alkali Abe swung his arms frantically. "Whoop! whoop!" he cried, "did you ever see the like of it? Oh! ain't that elephant a dandy? Ef I ever git a chance I'll take him ter my heart—I will, by Jericho! I'm the Game Chicken from Texas, spurred, feathered an' top-knotted; but I'm a weepin' canary 'longside that thar elephant. Oh! ain't he doin' 'em up? Wahi wahi!"

Luckily for the non-combatants, Babel did not see fit to inaugurate general destruction. He knocked over a few persons with his trunk, and then rushed down the street again.

Some of the Legion plucked up courage and faced him, but he caught one up in his serpent-like grasp and flung him against a building with great force.

After that, Babel met with no opposition.

Alkali Abe attempted to dance, to exhibit his joy, but did not make a great success.

"He's a howlin' beauty, is the elephant!" the borderman declared. "Don't he do 'em up pooty! Why, ef we was all elephants, we could take that town by storm afore you could say, 'Whoop her up, Gin'ral Jackson!' Why, blame the measly varmint! he's goin' off!"

The Game Chicken's smile faded away. Babel, instead of proceeding to annihilate all the men of No-World Kingdom, was dashing straight toward the south, but attacking no one. He had a clear road.

There was not a person in town who aspired to engage him in battle. If he had tried, he could have cleared the place in short time. Everybody was in a panic; no one could fully realize the situation.

When he reached the end of the street he still kept on his way, and soon disappeared in the darkness.

He left consternation and dread behind him, however, and the Hermit People had seen only the beginning of trouble.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE INTRUDER IN THE SACRED ROOM.

"THE show is over," remarked Alkali Abe, "an' I reckon we may as wal crawl inter our den."

"We are not likely to be searched for, to-night," added Scatter-shot.

"Should say not. Them Legions is all broke up."

"The lights begin to go out. It really looks as if they think they'll be safer in the dark."

"I'm thankful the lights has been a-goin'. I would not 'a' missed seein' Babel's charge fur a mint o' money. It was great! How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"Of course it's kerreck. What I says ginerally is. I hate a bragger, but the truth should be spoke at all times. I'm a man o' far sight, an' keen sight, an' true sight. I'm a fowl that kin eat corn or cobble-stones, dough, doughnuts or dornicks, ef I be weak on the crow. Modesty forbids my gittin' up on a fence an' cacklin' my own praises. I hate a bragger. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"Now fur kiver!" quoth the Game Chicken, feeling that his character was fully established.

They went to the ruins. The previous search had been successful in revealing a place that suited them. Roland Ludlow had gone ahead impetuously through what seemed a perfect ruin, only to reach a large and comfortable room, at last.

The way was through a tangle of displaced stones and walls, one wall at a certain point, having fallen against another at an angle, forming a triangle and a corridor at one and the same time.

A quantity of pine knots had been gathered, and the chosen room was fairly lighted.

At one end was a sort of throne, but whether it had been that of king, judge or priest could not be told. Dry decay had fallen upon the wood, and it would not uphold one's weight.

The stones which formed the room were firm, with the exception that, here and there, a crack gave evidence to the earthquake which, centuries before, had destroyed the city.

Scatter-shot was more interested in the place than any one else.

Who had been the people who once lived there? What had become of them when the city was ruined? That some had escaped death was probable, though not certain. If so, where had they then gone? Had they left descendants? If so, where were they? and, if they still lived, had they become so low and ignorant that not even tradition left any record of the people of old?

At the further side of the room was a place which, though an aperture in the wall, seemed to be no more. Displaced stones blocked it, having apparently fallen from the outside.

Scatter-shot, however, noticed that there was a singular regularity about the stones which remained firm, and, upon investigation, decided that a door had once existed there.

He determined to explore the place, and be-

gan the removal of the stones. This was not difficult, and the result was very encouraging. A passage was revealed beyond, and he took one of the lighted knots and set out to look further.

The passage soon ended at a flight of stairs which led downward, and he descended. The steps were firm, and a credit to the builders whose work lived while they were but dust.

Another room was below, and Scatter-shot found that he had reached something of interest, at last. The place was not barren, but lined on both sides with life-size statues.

They were carved in a species of stone not above the average, and the work was faulty, but it was not hard to follow the sculptor. Each and all appeared to be of some apostle of the religion of the unknown people. The sculptor represented each one clad in a priest-like robe, and their attitudes were reverent. The faces were regular and of Caucasian formation, unless the surveyor erred in judgment.

On the pedestal of each was an inscription, but in characters were like nothing Scatter-shot had ever seen before. There existed, probably, the dead man's name and partial record, but it gave no information to the representative of the people that, hundreds of years later than the day of the last race, were pressing into the southwest territory to found anew a Government where once one had existed, fluctuated, died and lost recollection in history's pages.

At the further end was an altar of stone. Upon it, at various points, stood bowls, jars and urns of stone—plainly, the sacred vessels of the priests, but as uncommunicative as they.

In all the room there was not one article of gold and silver, and the natural inference was that the last race had never made use of them.

A second stairway existed at the right of the altar, and upon ascending, Scatter-shot found himself among ruins so erratic that he did not venture far. It was an excellent chance to become lost.

Returning to his companions, he communicated an idea he had formed.

What better place of refuge could they find than the sacred room of the lost people? Probably no human foot had trodden there since the day of the earthquake, and with so many passages, rooms, nooks and corners, it was liable to escape notice even if King Richard's followers searched there.

And if the fugitives' presence was discovered, there were two ways of escape.

Alkali Abe agreed with this opinion.

"Unless we give up all idee o' rescuin' the other folks, we've got ter hev some good hidin'-place," he admitted, "an' I reckon this can't be beat. Ef the enemy find us, they've got ter do a right smart job, by Jericho! The only pinch is in the matter o' food, an' I reckon that kin be arranged. I'll be out at daybreak, an' ef the enemy ain't out, too, I agree, promise, pledge an' covenant ter bring in grub enough ter make our stomjacks as round as an apple, an' keep them filled that way fur days."

This promise put them at ease, and they descended to the sacred room.

Alkali Abe had no interest in the history of lost nations, and but little more reverence for anything earthly. He took off his hat to the men in priestly robes, and bowed low.

"Happy ter meet ye, gents!" he declared. "It ain't often I chance onter anybody so old, but I must say you are right wal preserved. Muskles on 'em don't look an oita flabby, do they, Scatter-shot? Only fault I kin find is that they gaze upon us in a stony way. Possibly they're mad 'cause we introod, though I don't see as their backs is up. Right smart show!"

"Better than you will make, two hundred years hence," the surveyor returned.

"It's my hope, cumrade, that, when I go ter the hereafter, I'll jog along 'all in a heap, an' not leave an effigy o' my carkiss standin' 'round ter ketch wind an' rain in the corners, be critikised, an' pelted with mud by small boys. Them is my idee o' statoots. Give 'em ter the proud and haughty, but nary one fur Abraham Partridge, Game Chicken an' screamin' eagle. How's that, Seth Mason?"

"Kerreck!"

"Jabberin' jaguars, yes!"

Honest Abe always took a good deal of pleasure in his partner's brief corroborative replies, and had never done so to a greater extent than then.

He definitely decided that statues were of no value.

The sleeping accommodations of the place were not of the best, but Abe and Seth went out and collected a quantity of moss which was not a bad substitute for something better.

Ariadne, in particular, was not disposed to complain. Better a bed of mere rock than quarters in King Richard's palace.

While there she had been notified formally that one of the nobility had claimed her for his future wife, and the possibility that she would meet that fate had made her nervous to an extreme.

The night passed peacefully, and Ariadne slept so soundly and so long that, when she awoke, she found that Abe and Seth had brought in game enough to last for several days.

The little party were more hopeful than before, but not oblivious to the fact that a zealous hunt would be made for them.

This began at an early hour. Some of the members of the Legion began a search for the fugitives' trail, but they did not meet with marked success.

Nothing came of it, and the men had to settle down to a blind hunt. No time was wasted during the forenoon, and the surrounding hills were visited far and near. Once a party came into the valley of the ruined city, and wandered around among the broken-down buildings for some time, but they did not seem to expect to find anything, and found no more than they expected.

The fugitives decided that the enemy were wholly at fault.

As night approached a consultation was held to decide upon their own course. Ludlow advocated prompt attack upon the enemy's position, arguing that the elements of success lay in the very boldness of the project; the Hermit People would not expect them to venture around again so soon.

"That don't go fur a sure fact," Abe replied, "an' I reckon it'll be resky ter go thar at present."

"I, for one, am willing to risk something for the unknown prisoner, Ilzarra."

"I hope I ain't the man ter be back'ard when females is in trouble, but prudence is sometimes better nor courage."

"Remember how dangerous her position is!"

"That's a fact."

"Scatter-shot is authority for the statement that the queen is bound to kill her."

"And the king ter protect her."

"King he may be, but a jealous wife bars his way. That renders him almost helpless."

"If it is the will of the majority," interrupted Scatter-shot, "I will resume my gray-and-orange suit, and make another attempt."

"Don't!" exclaimed the Game Chicken, hastily. "We can't afford to hev ye commit suicide. Before now, the feller from which we took the suit must 'a' been found by his fellers, an' they are on ter your dodge. Don't play Legion-man, again."

"I will try it," Ludlow added.

"You must be in love with Miss Ilzarra," dryly observed Abe.

Roland glanced at Ariadne.

"I am not—not in the least. My only object is to rescue one whom I believe to be a deserving woman. Humanity demands it."

"Say no more," directed Scatter-shot; "I will attempt the work. Nobody knows what a day may bring forth, and, as I've served the queen once, it is my place, if anybody's, to move for Ilzarra. Let her be whom she may, she certainly has demands upon us. To-night I will make the attempt!"

"Then we'll be one man short, that's all!" grumbled the far-sighted borderman.

A sudden exclamation from Ariadne caused them to turn. An intruder was in the room—a girl clad all in gray, and with the unmistakable insignia of the Hermit People upon her.

By one person, at least, they were discovered.

CHAPTER XX.

A TRAITOR'S OFFER.

SHORTLY after noon of the day last referred to King Richard received a message to the effect that one of his prisoners, Allison Blake, wished to see him. The object of the request Blake had steadily refused to make known, but his message to the king contained the assertion that the latter would be well repaid by giving him audience.

Richard deliberated for awhile, and then went to the room where Blake was kept in durance.

"My dear sir," fluently began Allison, "I am very glad to see you!"

A cold nod was the only reply.

"You received my message, I presume."

"What have you to say?" Richard demanded brusquely.

"It is a business proposition, pure and simple, whereby we are to arrive at mutual gain—"

"Come to the point!"

"I will," Blake agreed, not in the least abashed by the peremptory manner of the other.

"You lost some prisoners, last night?"

"How do you know?"

"I am not a clod. More than that, I know more about them and their purpose than you—"

"Having been one of them."

"Exactly! And therein lies the foundation of my scheme. You want them back; I want my freedom. Can we trade?"

"Explain!" curtly ordered the king, seowling upon Blake, whose easy, flippant manner did not please him.

"I am, outwardly, a friend of these people; really, I hate them bitterly. They have wronged me, but think I don't know it. Hence, we are on good terms, and they trust me fully. Liberty is as valuable to me as to them, and I must look out for Number One. Release me, and I'll deliver them into your hands!"

"What do I gain by it?"

"You gain them."

"And lose you."

"Oh! but you head off danger. Why do you

suppose they are here? Do you suppose ten men, armed to the teeth, have come here—"

"Ten?"

"That's the number," unblushingly asserted Blake. "And they are here for business. They have heard that you have valuable diamonds here, and they have vowed to kill you all off and get the sparklers. They confided their plan to me when my female companion and I happened on them, after our escape from the Apaches, who seized us when we were wrecked on a railroad train—and I was asked to join the party and help massacre you, but I declined. I'm not a warrior, anyhow."

Blake's speech flowed on without a break, and he tried to make himself very bland and pleasant, but King Richard was more disgusted than anything else.

"If you can manage to come to the point in a day or two, I shall be glad," he hoarsely returned.

"Excuse me if I am keeping you waiting, your Majesty. This, then, is my proposition: Release me and my female friend, Eudora Redmoor, and we'll deliver your enemies into your hands."

"How?"

"We shall be well received. We will then watch our chance to inform you, and you can capture the whole party. After that you are to release me and Eudora, and we gladly will make haste to get out of your country."

"If the enemy is to be found, why can't I find them? If not, how can you find them?"

"Rely upon it, they will be on the watch. If they see you, or your men, on the move, they will hide away. But if they see Eudora and me, acting like escaped captives, they will hasten to take us in. Then I'll deliver them over to you."

Blake made this Judas-like proposition without any embarrassment. The king's former harshness had relapsed into patience, the meaning of which was not easily read.

"And what part is the Redmoor girl to play that I need to release her?" he inquired.

"That is the clinching of the nail upon them, your Majesty. If I went alone they might wonder that I had escaped and be suspicious of me; but the company of Miss Redmoor will take away the doubt. They won't mistrust her or any enterprise in which she has part."

King Richard was silent.

"It is your one chance to cripple the foe," Blake added, his confident manner giving place to one of anxiety.

"I will see the girl."

So saying, Richard called a slave and gave orders that soon brought Eudora to Blake's prison-room.

The young woman was not looking well. When she was seen at Alkali Abe's camp in the mountains, she had been worn and weary looking, with dark circles around her eyes, and an indescribable appearance of ever-present misery. All these signs had increased. She was haggard, pale and wan, and days seemed to have fallen upon her, of late, like years.

Blake started up to meet her with exaggerated cordiality and sympathy.

"Dear friend, do I see you once more?" he exclaimed, clasping her hand. "This is a great pleasure, indeed."

He winked at her warningly, but she allowed her hand to lie coldly in his, and showed no emotion whatever.

"Yes?" she returned, indifferently.

"Be of good cheer, for there is hope that we may soon set our faces toward home."

Eudora regarded him critically. Knowing him so well, she suspected that some scheme was under way.

"In brief," he added, "we are promised our liberty upon one condition."

"You may name it."

"You and I are not in this region with any selfish motive in view, Eudora," he went on, pressing her hand as a fresh warning. "We should not have been here at all had not the train been attacked and we taken away by violence. Now, naturally, we desire liberty most of all."

"Come to the point!" demanded the king, with fresh impatience.

"I will. Eudora, our good friend here has promised us liberty upon one condition. Several of the outlaws of whom Abe Partridge is leader are near, and they are about to attack Richard. We are to be set free if we frustrate their purpose, and the plan is for us to be released from here. We will then go to the outlaws, pretend that we escaped, and watch our chance to deliver them into King Richard's hands."

Eudora turned to Richard.

"Is this true?" she demanded.

"Do you doubt your friend?"

"I ask you, is it true?"

"You have heard."

"And you ask me to betray my late companions?"

"Do you object?"

"Object! I would die a thousand deaths in your palace before I would be party to such infamy!" cried Eudora, with almost hysterical emotion, yet with enough of firmness to emphasize a settled purpose.

"Eudora!" exclaimed Blake, warningly, almost threateningly.

"My record is not one I have cause to be proud of," she went on, looking only at the king. "I have been weak and erring, but you mistake my nature if you think I am so utterly depraved as you indicate. Help betray them? Never, never, never!"

She trembled with excitement, and looked more like a human wreck than ever, but there could be no doubt of her sincerity.

Blake had turned white with anger, but King Richard shrugged his shoulders phlegmatically.

"That seems to settle it," he remarked.

"It does settle it, as far as I am concerned."

"If this mad girl persists in her course," interrupted Blake, in a husky voice, "you can only let your rules take their course, your Majesty. As the wife of a slave, and a slave herself, she may find a field of operations more congenial than freedom in other parts of the world."

"At least, I shall not have sold my soul for a price," Eudora quickly returned. "I can suffer slavery or death, but I will not be a Judas!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PLOT AGAINST ILZARRA.

ALLISON BLAKE muttered a fierce exclamation, and the look he gave Eudora was murderous. He had planned his treacherous scheme for his own gain, and, apparently, successfully urged it upon King Richard. Now, it was a bitter disappointment to be baffled by what he considered the weak sentimentality of a woman.

"Fool!" he cried, harshly; "you have ruined yourself!"

"Mine was a ruined life long ago!" Eudora answered, bitterly.

"And you want it to remain in the mud, eh?"

"In no other way could I put it as low as by complying with this scheme."

"Do you forget that you have a purpose in life?" Blake asked, pointedly.

Eudora started, but made no reply.

"As a slave here you lose all chance," he added.

"Probably there never was one. Say no more; I refuse to act the Judas!"

King Richard had been watching both closely.

"You seem to lack harmony," he now observed.

"The folly of this woman be upon her own head!" Blake explained.

"And you?"

"Send the woman away, and I'll talk with you!"

The king summoned a slave, and Eudora was conducted from the room.

"Speak!" Richard ordered.

"I'll undertake the work alone. I am pretty sure that Abe Partridge and his outlaws will receive me in friendship, and, if they do, I can work better than to have a moon-worshipping woman around."

"What is her secret?"

"Her secret?"

"Yes. She has seen grievous trouble. What is it? What is the 'purpose in life' to which you referred, when speaking with her?"

Blake looked uneasily, and, for a moment, his usually fluent speech failed him. Then he answered:

"Her husband, who was my cousin, was a graceless scamp. He deserted her, and, aided by me, she has been pursuing him."

The king's penetrating gaze never left the speaker's face, and Blake, who was accumulating falsehoods rapidly, was ill at ease.

"Why should she 'pursue' such a man?" King Richard asked.

"He robbed her of money and jewels."

"So she is a married woman?"

"Yes."

"What was her husband's name?"

"James Gray."

"How happens it she is called Redmoor?"

"It is an assumed name."

"I thought it might have been her maiden name."

"No; oh, no; she was a Randall," Blake explained, with some haste.

"Where was her early home?"

"In Florida."

The prisoner was lying with reckless rapidity. Even while he did so he wondered whom Richard would believe if Eudora should ultimately tell him the truth. As far as he was concerned, his reputation for veracity was already settled. Criminal that the king was, he had not parted from discernment when he bade farewell to honor.

He had read Blake well, and knew that the latter was speaking falsely.

The king moved toward the door.

"I will see you again," he remarked.

"But my scheme?" was the eager inquiry.

"Shall be considered."

With this brief, coldly-spoken reply Richard left the room. Blake was anxious to delay him, but his whole manner indicated that persistence would be worse than useless. The schemer had an unpleasant suspicion that his effort had only made his own situation more serious.

Richard went at once to his private room and locked himself in. Then he began to pace the floor, looking downward with troubled face and a moody frown.

"What am I to make of this?" he muttered. "Are my sins coming home to me yet more keenly? Who is this girl who has drifted in upon me? She has not the family look, but the name is suggestive. I do not believe Blake's explanation. If I only dared to question her—but I dare not! Perhaps I am wrong, anyhow; she has not the family look. If she is a Redmoor of the old family, she has not found any more than Redmoor luck, if her face tells a true story."

Up and down the room walked the unhappy monarch—up and down, still looking gloomily at the floor without seeing anything there, weaving his fingers in and out among each other, and lost in thought.

"She must be a Redmoor!" he finally decided. "I said, long ago, that my sins had recoiled upon my own head, and this is but fresh proof of it. Oh! the wretched, wretched past! Would that I could recall it—but why speak like a child? The past is in the hands of time; the future, in my case, will be torn from life as a prize for death!"

He loosened his collar, as if breathing was a difficult task.

"Judgment is on my track. Here is a kingdom which is a mockery of the word; a confederation of miserable scoundrels, of criminals of all grades, and I am the leader. King! What a barren title! King of ruffians and murderers—and I am the worst of the lot. 'Vengeance is mine, and I will repay,' saith the prophecy. The vengeance has begun, and I—I am stricken in my only vulnerable spot!"

While the king was thus communing with his unsatisfactory recollections, doubts and fears, Queen Augusta was in her private room, with Myrrha, her favorite slave, by her side.

The latter was a girl of unusual intelligence, and Augusta had never found her over-burdened with delicate scruples.

"Do we bend or break?" muttered the queen, looking at vacancy as Richard had looked, seeing nothing; but with passion and malevolence on her face in place of trouble and gloom. "Do we bend or break?—or do we spring up like the strong, bent sapling, casting off the restraining force, and standing more proudly erect than ever? Do we go to the grave a victim, or do we rise to conquer?"

"Your Majesty," spoke Myrrha, "you are in a gloomy mood?"

"How else should I be?"

"You should rally."

"My foes smite me."

"And you?"

"And I? There's the rub; do I bend or break?—or do I smite back? Myrrha, I have a plan."

"Yes, your Majesty?"

"Can that vile Ilzarra be married to Alarie, this night, and Richard be kept ignorant of what is going on?"

"If you can so plan it."

"Suppose we say to the centurion, you are being deceived! Put not your trust in princes; they can pledge ye with the tongue, smile upon ye with an amiable smile, and smite ye to the heart with a dagger! To be more practical, Myrrha, can we make Alarie believe that Richard is bent on playing him false, and so hasten the marriage?"

"Why not?"

"The female Ilzarra will not consent."

"Other brides in No-World Kingdom have refused to consent."

"True, but can this marriage be carried on without alarm to the king?"

"I think it can be done, your Majesty."

"Then it shall be done. With the ignoble woman married, there may be faint hope for me. 'Tis the only way. If I hesitate, the king will surely elope with her. I have my choice between killing her and marrying her to Alarie, and I think—here her face expressed the lowest of malevolent emotions—"that I can best repay my wrongs by the latter course."

"It will strike that Ilzarra more keenly."

"Right, Myrrha. You, then, shall go to good Alarie, at once, and make known my proposal. If he consents, plans shall be arranged, and this night shall see the game ended. Go you to Alarie!"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Say to him," Augusta harshly added, "that I'll stand between him and Richard's anger, and that, if trouble comes of it, we will conquer though we make our streets red to do it!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A WARRIOR'S WEDDING NIGHT.

PLAINLY, the girl who had appeared in the room where Alkali Abe and his party had found shelter could not be another wanderer from the outside world. All arrived at the proper conclusion at once, and each man caught up his rifle.

She quickly put out her hand in a friendly way.

"Do not be alarmed!" she directed. "I am alone, and you need not fear me."

"Who in jabberin' jaguars be ye?" Abe demanded.

"I come from King Richard's palace."

"That's a poor recommend."

"But I am a messenger from a prisoner."

"What?"

"Ilzarra."

"She is right," corroborated Roland Ludlow. "I saw her there, and she appeared to be true-blue. Her name is Zorana."

The girl rewarded him with a smile.

"The gentleman does not forget his friends."

"I hope Ilzarra is not in fresh trouble?"

"No, but her fears and her danger grow greater every hour. She must escape, or fall prey to the wicked queen."

"Would that we could help her."

"Can't you?"

"It's a risky job."

"Gal, how did ye find us?" the Game Chicken asked, suspiciously!

"I guessed better than the warriors," replied Zorana, smiling. "They looked everywhere slightly, and carefully nowhere. I thought from the first that you would be here. I searched long and closely, but should not have found you had I not known of the sacred room here. I had often been here in the past. This building was the priests' temple, and I suppose these statues were the priests themselves, through many generations. Nobody else ever looked here much, or felt interested, but I did. As a last resort, in hunting for you, I tried this room."

This explanation was made with such evidence of ingenuousness that even Abe was inclined to believe.

"What does Ilzarra want?" asked Scatter-shot.

"To be rescued!"

"Has she a plan?"

"No."

"Can she, or you, suggest any course?"

"All we could think of was that I should be at the door to admit you, and give you a key to her room. That would be enough if we were sure there would be no guard posted. There may be, after the trouble of last night."

"That's jest it," Abe muttered.

"I'll undertake the work!" Scatter-shot announced.

"You will?" cried Zorana, brightening up greatly.

"Yes. Somebody has got to take risk in this case, or else we must leave the other prisoners in the hands of the enemy. Allison Blake does not command my sympathy, and I shall take no risks for him! Eudora Redmoor, though she arouses many doubts in my mind, I will not leave in this peril. Next we consider this Ilzarra. Friend Ludlow has seen her, and pronounced her a deserving young woman. If I can help her, I will."

"You'll lose yer skulp, by Jericho!" Alkali Abe declared.

"I hope not."

"It ain't no case o' doubt."

"Well, the world can do without Scatter-shot, the adventurer!" was the somewhat bitter reply.

"This small world can't; we need ye."

"Abe, this opposition is not worthy of your bold nature."

"Yes, 'tis!"

"I say not. The whole West bears tribute to your valor—"

"Jabberin' jaguars! let me go in yer place, an' I won't weep a wail, but I hate ter see a young man o' your bone an' muskle git wiped out in 'arly spring. Let me go!"

"Your request is refused, friend Abe. There are reasons, well known to you, why I am best fitted for the venture. I would not yield the place, anyhow, for I consider my life the least valuable of any here."

"Nonsents!"

"Nonsense, or not, the die is cast."

Scatter-shot was not to be moved from this ultimatum, and arrangements were made, accordingly, with Zorana. When this was done she returned, alone, to the town.

At a late hour Scatter-shot followed. The Game Chicken accompanied him to the gap between the two valleys.

"Look out fur yerself, my boy!" the veteran advised. "You'd better fight a 'hull regiment o' Paches than ter go on this trip. The worst of it is, you've got ter depend on the gray gal, Zorana. This may, or may not, be safe. I like the women sex woundedly, but you can't no more tell how one on 'em will jump than you kin tell whar a flea will show up next time, when you've chased the onsartin critter off from the calf o' yer leg. Fleas an' women is p'ison onsartin; though, fur that, I like the women best."

The borderman wandered from the subject, but Scatter-shot did not.

After listening to a few more friendly cautions, he left Abe and proceeded toward the town.

From that moment his way was one of great danger. He knew not at what point a guard, spy or soldier of the enemy might be. He had put on the gray-and-orange suit in which he had figured as Theseus—not because he thought the

late trick had remained undiscovered, but because it was a safer costume to wear than his own.

No danger appeared on the way, and he finally approached the rear of the palace. At the door he found a thread extending out between the door and the threshold. He pulled upon it, according to previous arrangement, and the signal was at once answered.

The door was opened, and Zorana stood before him. She made a gesture to request caution.

"All seems to be well," she whispered. "Come in, at once!"

Scatter-shot obeyed.

"Ilzarra is anxiously waiting," the girl added. "She is full of hope, and you will win her undying gratitude, if you rescue her."

"Lead on!" the explorer directed, impatiently; he was there for work, and his only interest in Ilzarra was to save her.

He cynically assured himself that he did not care a rush whether she was grateful or not.

They mounted to the top floor. The hall was entirely dark, but, when they reached the door of Queen Augusta's ante-room, a band of light was to be seen beneath.

Zorana glanced at it anxiously, but she was little prepared for what occurred.

The door suddenly opened, the light flashed out fully, and they stood face to face with the queen and Alaric, the centurion.

Scatter-shot's hand sought his knife, and he was about to spring upon the leader of the Legion when Augusta's face brightened.

"Here is our good Theseus!" she exclaimed. "This is fortunate; he is a good and faithful man, and will make our position all the stronger. Welcome, Theseus!"

Alaric looked at his fellow wearer of the gray-and-orange in a puzzled way. He did not remember the man. He had always been cold and conceited, and, rightly regarding himself as second only to the king and the queen—and better than the "nobility"—he had never made free with his followers.

Hence, he was not sure that he knew the faces of all of them, though he had supposed that he did.

Luckily, though he remembered the name of Theseus, he could not recall his appearance.

He decided, mentally, that a man recommended by the queen ought to be all right, and the momentary doubt vanished from his mind.

Scatter-shot, watching both persons keenly, had bowed as a loyal subject should, and the queen added:

"I suppose you were coming to see if I had more orders for you?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"I do desire your aid. But this girl—what of her?"

She looked suspiciously at Zorana.

"I happened upon her," the explorer boldly explained, "and commanded her to conduct me to your room, your Majesty."

"You did right, and I am glad she is here. She might be where she would do us damage, for I suspect that she is more devoted to her infamous mistress than to her own people. We have important work ahead, Theseus!"

"Yes, your Majesty?"

"This night our good Alaric takes a bride!"

The eyes of the queen were upon him, but Scatter-shot received the announcement with resolution.

"I congratulate our leader," he answered, bowing to the centurion.

"He is to marry Ilzarra, and you shall be present at the ceremony. Alaric, can you dispense with us?"

"Yes."

"Then we will precede you to the chamber of audience. Theseus, take Zorana and follow me. The others will soon come."

Zorana, breathing hard, sent a glance to Scatter-shot which implored him to attack Alaric at once, and have the suspense over, but the explorer was not so rash. Unlike the maid he stood where he could see two male slaves in the ante-room, and to start a struggle there, against such odds, would be to arouse every one in the palace.

King Richard might then exercise authority against Alaric, but it would not be in favor of the would-be rescuers.

When the queen started Scatter-shot followed, taking Zorana's arm. Conversation was out of the question, but he warned with a look, and a pressure of her arm, not to commit any act of rashness. Augusta led to the lower floor, and they entered the room where the king always gave audience to the people.

It was large, but grim and gloomy. When the Hermit People appropriated building stones from the old ruins they had, to avoid trouble and labor, followed the pattern of the lost race as far as possible. The result in this case was a room plain and somber enough for the perpetration of the crime planned.

The queen sat down in Richard's elevated chair, and indicated where Scatter-shot and Zorana should stand.

The explorer appeared to be in a mood of perfect tranquillity, yet he had determined to

inaugurate a fight in which the chances were desperately against him. He could expect no help, and must fight several men. That he could conquer seemed a wild belief, but he was bound to risk the venture.

That meant, to risk his life.

And for whom?

He began to feel some curiosity in regard to the mysterious Ilzarra. He had a right to, if he was to fight—perhaps, to die—for her. Was she worth the sacrifice? What was she like? She was young—was she beautiful? Ludlow had said so, but opinions might not agree.

Yet, he was curious, in a mild way, to see the woman.

Footsteps sounded at the entrance to the room.

He looked, and Alaric entered with a pair of slaves and the female captive behind him.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SCATTER-SHOT'S OVERWHELMING DISCOVERY.

DOWN the room came the procession. Alaric walked like a conqueror. His head was erect, and his face bore an expression of triumph. It was not the look of a happy groom, but, rather, of a victorious knave.

The victim of the plot bore none of these signs. She was moving slowly; her head was far from erect of poise; and her whole manner was that of misery and despair. Appearances indicated that she had struggled at the beginning, and had now abandoned the useless effort. The loose wrapper she wore over her regular costume was torn and disarranged.

Queen Augusta's eyes glittered with hatred and anticipated revenge.

Scatter-shot was not so situated that he could see Ilzarra's face until the procession reached the raised chair of the queen. A momentary diversion was caused by the entrance of a man in flowing robes—the so-called "priest" of the Hermit People—but the explorer quickly looked back at Ilzarra.

The slaves had turned her around, and her face was toward him.

He looked, and then gave a start as sharp as if he had been stricken with a knife.

He regarded her in dumfounded wonder which quickly gave place to consternation.

The cool, somewhat cynical explorer had given place to a man moved to an extreme of emotion. Mixed with dismay one might have seen fear, bewilderment, unbelief, uncertainty and joy—a strange combination. Plainly, he had received a great shock, and words would have described his mental condition but feebly.

He was resolute and quick-witted, however, and he rallied from the shock much quicker than the average person would have done.

He had recognized Ilzarra, but it occurred to him that a relation of the fact would be injurious to both her and himself. With a great effort he recovered his outward calmness.

But the recognition was not to be averted.

The mis-named priest moved around to such a position that it became evident the iniquitous ceremony was about to be commenced, and Ilzarra aroused from her hopeless mood. She raised her gaze and flashed it along the line of spectators, seeking for a face that might express pity.

She saw Scatter-shot.

Then his own start was duplicated. She recoiled for a moment; doubt, uncertainty and unbelief were pictured on her face—then she gave a cry of joy which was almost frantic, and sprung toward him.

"Howell!—oh! Howell!" she exclaimed, and her arms were extended toward him.

Scatter-shot did not reject the recognition. Instead, he received her with extended hands, and clasped his arms around her. Another moment and she lay almost fainting upon his breast, but murmuring incoherent words of love and joy.

Every one gazed at the pair in silence. All were too much surprised to speak; they were stupefied by the unexpected turn of affairs.

But Scatter-shot regarded them unwaveringly—with a calmness which was unnatural. He had met the woman to whom every ennobling emotion of his heart was devoted, and the strong desire to wrest Alaric's prey away had become a purpose as fixed as the desire to live, but he saw none the less clearly the difficulties in the way, and the knowledge that the chances were against his saving her turned the whole current of his life.

His blood seemed like ice, and the stony gaze of calmness he exhibited was far from natural. It was Queen Augusta who first recovered power of speech.

"What madness is this?" she demanded.

"Ay, what do you mean, dog?" Alaric added, in fierce anger.

"I mean that I wish to treat with you," Scatter-shot answered.

"How?"

"I will buy this prisoner!"

"Buy her?"

"That was my offer."

"Dog, you are mad!"

"Look you, Alaric, you belong to a party of men to whom wealth is a god. Release this

prisoner, and I will make you the richest person in No-World Kingdom."

"You! Where would you get your money?"

"Not here, but you should have it all the same—"

"The man is crazed!" Augusta interrupted.

"He surely is. I sell the woman? Never! If I did not believe the fellow insane, I'd kill him for making the proposal. Sell her? Never, never! And to a mere unknown of my Legion—Unknown! There may be something in that. Who is this fellow whom you recommend so strongly?"

"Don't you know him?"

"No."

"By my life! that is strange!" Augusta asserted.

"I believe we are being duped!" hotly cried the centurion. "Fellow, you are under arrest, and will remain so until you prove yourself what you claim. I don't believe you are of the Hermit People!"

Scatter-shot had been soothing Ilzarra unknown to the others. By the pressure of his hand upon hers he had tried to arouse her to a sense of the situation, and he believed that he had not been unsuccessful.

"All that I claim I can do," he now answered, steadily. "This lady appears to be fainting, and should be in charge of her maid. Girl, care for her!"

He passed Ilzarra over to the wondering Zorana, and then turned slowly toward his enemies.

From the moment when he recognized Ilzarra he had not had two opinions as to what must come. He had only delayed because, to carry out his purpose, the captive must have physical and mental strength and acumen.

He was ready, at last, for the crowning effort.

He began to turn slowly, as if no thought of violence was in his mind, but, the moment that he faced Alaric, he leaped upon the centurion like a tiger. He had secretly drawn a revolver and turned it so as to improvise a club, and he now brought it down on the warrior's head with all his force.

It was a telling blow, and Alaric took one step and fell senseless to the floor.

Then Scatter-shot rushed at the slaves. He had entertained hopes that they would prove cowards, but such was not the case. They stood their ground bravely, and received the shock with firmness.

Great as the odds were against him the explorer still had hope, but the priest proved to be a worse foe than any one else.

That person raised a whistle to his lips and blew blast after blast which, loud and piercing, fell upon Scatter-shot's ears like the knell of doom.

With a great effort he dashed the slaves aside and, swinging one arm around Ilzarra, started to retreat.

Ilzarra had recovered her courage, and, accompanied by Zorana, she willingly did her part in retreat. But they went with a great din behind them. The priest was blowing the whistle, while Queen Augusta, alarmed lest her prey should escape her, stood upon the platform, swung her arms wildly, and as wildly, but incoherently, shrieked orders to the slaves to pursue.

Scatter-shot was about to tear the door open, but some one else forestalled him.

It was opened almost in his face, and he saw several gray-clad slaves. He went at them impetuously. The clubbed revolver was used with effect, and he had almost cut a path through them before they regained their presence of mind.

But dangers accumulated. The king's household, already rendered on the alert by the events of the previous night, could not fail to be aroused by the whistle.

The explorer had only a few yards between him and the outer door, but fate was inexorably against him. That door, like the other, was suddenly opened, and half a dozen men of the Legion entered.

The sight gave courage to the slaves, and they leaped upon the single man like wolves upon a wounded buffalo. A blow made him stagger against the wall, and he slipped and fell to his knees.

His hold upon Ilzarra was broken, and the fact served to collect his bewildered senses. He started up again and, with a half-dozen men over him, beat them back, but one blow, better aimed than the others, felled him again. That time he fell prostrate and did not rise; he was unconscious.

Hostile hands were raised over him, but Ilzarra flung herself upon his breast, and they could not strike.

Queen Augusta came hurrying out, uttering her incoherent cries, and warriors and foes gathered around the man who had gone down while fighting so valiantly; but a commanding voice suddenly stilled all other speakers.

"Stand back! What is the meaning of this?"

King Richard stood among them, his powerful form and impressive face making him look like a gladiator recalled from Rome's days of glory.

In the hush which followed he looked fixedly at the two persons who, with himself, formed the central figures in the group. Scatter-shot lay like a dead man, with Ilzarra caressing his hands and weeping in silence.

"What means all this?" the king added.

No one who could answer him dared to do so truthfully, but a slave finally found voice:

"This fellow has made the trouble, your Majesty."

"One of the Legion—and other warriors present. How is this? Who opened the palace doors? Who sent these men here?"

The speaker's voice was severe and threatening, and no one answered him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SUNDERED RULERS.

ALARIC came staggering out of the inner room, supported by the arm of the priest.

"Seize that man!" he hoarsely ordered, pointing to Scatter-shot. "Take him to my house, and put him under double guard!"

The subordinate looked at the king and did not move.

"Why don't you obey?" angrily demanded Alaric. "I am master here—"

"Who made you master?"

The quick retort came from King Richard, and he further brought himself to the notice of his warrior chief by advancing a step toward him. The centurion stood in silence, looking at Richard in surprise and confusion.

"Who made you master here?" the king sternly added.

"Your Majesty," answered Alaric, rallying. "I did not know that you were present, and I used the term to suggest to those men that they must obey their superior officers."

"Who is this dead, or insensible man?"

"A rebellious follower."

"And why are you in the palace?"

Once more Alaric failed to answer. If he had had an explanation ready he would have made it glibly, but he had none, and he well knew he was not quick-witted enough to explain away the sweeping evidence that lay before Richard's eyes.

Queen Augusta had been meditating, and the result thereof was that she decided that it was an impossibility to hide the truth. She had no fear of her so-called royal consort, and she now came to the front.

"I am the one to explain," she remarked, "for all you see here has proceeded out of my acts. For reasons which will readily occur to you I decided that Alaric should at once have the reward of his patience which you had promised, and I arranged that he should be married this night. The man upon the floor tried to take the bride away, and you see the result."

The king did not answer. He saw more clearly, and realized that an attempt had been made to defy his authority and wrest it from him, but he was as patient as he always was with the queen.

"We will listen to this to-morrow," he decided, after a pause. "Let the girl, Ilzarra, be returned to her room, and the insensible man taken to the east dungeon. When this is done, send me Ben Ali, Theodoric, Marc Antony and Tancred. I have use for them."

He waved his hand, and the warriors and slaves moved with all the more alacrity because, having treacherously turned against the king to serve Alaric and the queen, they were eager to make themselves in favor with Richard again.

Queen Augusta, however, was not influenced by fear.

"Stop!" she cried, so imperiously that the hirelings mechanically obeyed.

She then turned to the king.

"Why do you order the girl returned to her room?" she demanded.

"Where else should I put her?"

"Turn her out of doors!"

"Do the Hermit People usually release prisoners, to let them go where they will?"

"Then send her to Alaric's house."

"She is not yet his wife."

"There is the priest—let the ceremony be performed."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Alaric; "I am all ready."

"I am not," Richard coldly answered. "I do nothing blindly, and I want to investigate this night's work."

"Do you defy us?" demanded the queen, passionately.

"Augusta!"

"Don't reprove me!—don't dare to!"

"My royal lady, I did not dream of it," the king returned, with unflinching patience; "but if we are to talk let it be in private—"

"I prefer to talk here—here, before our people, who little know my wrongs—"

"Kindly defer comments until we are alone," requested the troubled ruler.

"So you want to shut off my speech?"

"I would talk in private with you."

"Murder me, you mean!"

"Queen Augusta, I beg that you will be calm—"

"I will talk here; I will talk before my peo-

ple, who ought to know my wrongs. They ought to know how vilely I have been treated by you—"

"Will you not wait—"

"I will not wait! I will let every one know that you have tired of me, now that I am growing old, and that you intend to make way with me and place yonder fair Jezebel in my place—"

King Richard had listened patiently, forbearingly, but with an air of deep trouble and gloom. He now turned to the warriors and slaves and spoke commandingly:

"Obey my orders! Take the prisoners to the places indicated, immediately!"

His voice startled those to whom it was addressed, and they made haste to obey.

"I demand justice!" almost shrieked Augusta, "I demand—"

Richard turned to the centurion and the priest:

"You can go to your proper places. I will see you to-morrow."

There was not a man in No-World Kingdom but held the king in awe. The two persons indicated knew they had incurred his anger, and they did not fail to obey. The priest went in haste: Alaric, with sullen deliberation which told of a mutinous spirit not quenched by personal fear.

Augusta had raved herself into a mood of such excitement that her debilitated system could no longer endure it, and, even while trying to utter her venomous speech further, she fell to the floor in a swoon.

Her husband's unflinching patience and sorrow saw no change, and he turned to the unemployed male and female servants.

"Convey her to her room," he pitifully directed, "and give her every attention. Spare no pains, and call the doctor, if necessary. I shall hold you accountable for your work, if it be ill."

Scatter-shot's motionless body was being lifted. All this while Ilzarra had been chafing and caressing his hands, and giving no heed to what was being said—in her distress she seemed not to hear anything—but she now started up in a panic.

"Oh! don't take him away—don't!"

"Peace!" answered Richard, in a hollow voice. "Fate cannot be blocked. Peace, and I will see you, later."

"But don't kill him—don't kill him!"

"Patience! Justice, though sure, shall not be unduly swift."

"But, oh! king—"

"Take her away!"

Uttering the cry hoarsely, hastily, with evidence of deep distress, Richard put out his hand almost imploringly and turned quickly away.

The effect of his orders was to be seen. The priest and the centurion had gone, and Scatter-shot and Augusta were being borne away. Slaves advanced to lead Ilzarra, and she did not resist. Dropping her head in a hopeless way she went where they willed.

The most hopeless, forlorn, miserable-looking person there was the King of No-World Kingdom. He looked like one whose last hope on earth was gone, and the subordinates were not the less eager to obey because their instinct told them that he was an object of pity.

He waited to see that his orders were obeyed, and then, leaving the door of the palace fastened, set a guard there, and ordered that no one be allowed to pass in or out until morning.

"This is no time for investigation," he said, to the slave who had general charge of the house, "but I shall want every witness to-morrow. Watch the insensible man who wears gray-and-orange—unlawfully, I suspect—and, while giving all medical attendance, if he needs it, do not allow him to escape. I make you responsible for the way you guard the palace for the rest of the night."

And then the king moved with slow and heavy steps toward his own apartments.

CHAPTER XXV.

IS ABE BEING LURED TO HIS DOOM?

"It's durned queer whar the boy is!"

The speaker was Alkali Abe. He stood on the elevated point at the junction of the two valleys.

It was near morning, but Scatter-shot had not returned from his venture at the king's palace.

"He's had time enough ter oust out several prisoners, an' I can't see no circumstance whar would delay operations so as ter make him wait this long. Jabberin' jaguars! kin it be the boy's got inter trouble?"

There was no one to help him out with his conjectures, so he turned to the dog, Lazarus, his sole companion upon the high land.

"Don't smell 'em, do yer, pup?" he asked.

If Lazarus did "smell 'em," he failed to testify to that effect.

"Hear the hours is rollin' on, Lazarus, an' Scatter-shot is still missin'. Hope no harm has come ter him. By Jemimah I'm afeard that pizen gray gal, Zorana, or whatev'er she's called; was a decoy whar has led him inter some dif. Ef so, let her beware! It's a zero-ed day when any t'pical critter gits A'liki Abe down onter 'em. I'm a r'ale Game Chicken o' Texas, with spurs like the teeth of a buzz-saw,

an' when I spar I hack off fingers, toes, heads an' eat settery—most especially, *eat settery*, which same, Lazarus, is Latin, Yankee or Dutch, I forgit which. It's right smart queer, by Jericho!"

The veteran drummed upon the barrel of his rifle with his fingers and watched for Scatter-shot, but Scatter-shot did not appear.

After awhile he returned to the sacred room under the ruined temple. Silent Seth, Ariadne, Yorick and Ludlow were all sleeping, but the latter awoke and started up.

"What news?" he asked, eagerly.

"Not a fraction."

"And no sign of Scatter-shot?"

"Nary sign."

"By my life! he has met with trouble!" declared the ex-King of the Trapeze.

"So it looks, I allow."

"Let me go to the town—"

"No! If any one was goin' I should claim the job, but 'twon't do no good fur anybody ter go. If our comrade is still a free man, he's all right; ef he's been took, we can't help him. I'm freshly suspicious o' the gal in gray."

"I think you wrong Zorana; I am sure you do. But Scatter-shot had a good deal to contend with, and I fear has met with ill luck."

"I wish I'd never let him gone," grumbled the Game Chicken. "It was *my* place, but he was powerfully set in his ways, an' would hev it so."

"He may return yet."

"But you an' me don't think he will. Don't let us split hairs, but face the probabilities fair an' squar'. I'm goin' out ter look ag'in."

"I'll accompany you."

They went. Day was beginning to dawn, and the mantle of night was growing less unfathomable to the gaze. Trees and other objects began to be visible in the valley, but there was no sign of Scatter-shot.

When it was fully light they returned to the temple. Their companions were astir. A general conversation followed, but no one was sanguine enough to maintain that hope still existed. Several hours had elapsed, and it was certain that the explorer, if at liberty, would not delay until the dawn of day.

They were forced to the conclusion that he was a prisoner—or worse. Abe still suspected Zorana.

The forenoon passed without change, and their fears increased. Later, the borderman, accompanied by the dog, went to the high point and carefully surveyed the valley. Nothing was to be seen to give any clue to the missing man.

"Mighty queer what's become o' my pard," Abe muttered. "Hev them No-World Kingdom rascals really ketched the venturesome explorer?"

There was no answer to the inquiry, but the dog, which had been looking with intentness, suddenly shifted his regard and uttered a low growl.

Abe then discovered a man skulking along the east side of the valley, and moving north.

He came closer, taking advantage of trees and bushes to keep out of sight, and the Game Chicken recognized Allison Blake.

It was not a pleasant discovery, and the veteran at once decided not to reveal himself to the skulker. He might be all right, but Abe doubted it, so he sat down and waited for Blake to pass.

The nose of the elevation soon concealed the latter, and nothing was heard of him for some time. Then a stone rattled close at hand, and the Game Chicken looked up and saw Blake only a few steps away.

The latter advanced with an air of enthusiasm, not intimidated by the dog's deep growl.

"Oh! I am glad, so glad to see you again!" he declared, rapturously.

"You don't say so!" Abe growled, ill-humorously.

"Thank fortune! I again see a friend."

"That's whar you hev the advantage o' me!"

"Eh?"

"I axed you ef you wore suspender-buttons, or only jabbed a splinter in, ter hold yer pants up!" curtly mis-explained the borderman.

"Don't make sport of my misfortunes. I have just escaped from the enemy."

"Hurt ye much?"

"Friend Partridge, I beg that you will not jest upon what is a very serious subject to me. After many hardships, I have escaped from the people of the valley—and infamous scoundrels they are!"

"Any more o' the breed around?"

"What breed?"

"Scoundrels."

"Hal ha!" laughed Blake, feebly. "Your penchant for a joke will crop out—"

"I don't know nothin' about any *prong-song*, or song without a *prong*," returned Abe, gruffly, "but I ain't been a-jokin'. Hows'ever, chant yer oration ef you've got anything ter say."

His manner was even more offensive than in the former days, but, somewhat strangely, Mr. Allison Blake ignored it.

"I've had a terrible time over yonder, Abe," he asserted, "but have escaped. Scatter-shot was arrested and put in the same room with me,

We attacked the guard and I got away, but Scatter-shot was recaptured."

"Hum!"

Abe rubbed his bearded chin and looked sharply at the speaker.

"I'm thoroughly stirred up by this affair," Blake proceeded, "and I'll beat those knaves out or die in the attempt. Eudora Redmoor is there, and, of course, I can't, and won't, desert her. If you care to take the risk, we'll alight on their backs to-night, like eagles upon so many chicks."

"Jes' so! 'Zactly! Correck! Sartain!"

"You are with me, then?"

"No; I ain't with ye *then*, nor *now*! Want ter git my head blowed off? Nary! Not much!"

"I'll go alone, if you are timid."

"Timid!" roared the borderman. "Me, timid? Say, 'timid' means *afraid*, don't it? Hey?"

"Oh! I didn't mean to put it that way—"

"Does *timid* mean *afraid*?" reiterated Abe, with fresh vehemence.

"That's about the meaning of it, perhaps, but I know well that *you* are not afraid."

"Right, by Jericho! Me, afraid? Why, I'm the Game Chicken o' Texas; a bird that kin scratch like a jaguar, yell like a 'Pache, an' sting like a tarantula. I'm a cock o' the walk, an' a chick that kin eat corn, ear an' all, an' never git the croup or lose a tail-feather. Yes, by Jericho!"

The borderman had lost his usual mental equilibrium. Blake had stung him to the quick by making the sly insinuation against his courage, and he was in a mood for any desperate measure.

Luckily, there was no temptation to commit an act of folly just then.

"Everybody knows of your courage," Blake graciously replied; "it can't be questioned. But, say, Abe, I am about starved. Can't you take me into camp and give me something to eat?"

"How did ye happen ter escape in broad daylight?"

"I escaped before the dawn of day, and went south first, because there were enemies in my path this way; then I set out to join you, but it was hard, slow work, owing to the danger of discovery."

"How did yer know whar we was?"

"Scatter-shot told me."

Blake answered readily, and looked Abe frankly in the face, but the latter's suspicions did not vanish. He did not believe the statement, and again thought of "the girl in gray" with doubt.

Nevertheless, he decided that it would be better to have the man in their quarters, where he could be watched, than outside.

"Foller me!" he said, suddenly.

Blake obeyed. Talking in what might have passed as an agreeable way only for the light in which he was held, he went with Abe to the ruined temple. A wave of irresolution and fear came upon the borderman as he approached the sacred room. He was betraying their most vital secret to the man. What would be the result?

Again came the idea that the wisest course of all was to have Blake where they could watch him, and he finished the hazardous step.

Their entrance created a sensation. The faces of Ludlow and Ariadne expressed doubt, surprise and uneasiness, and there was no chance to suspect that Silent Seth held any other views.

Blake greeted all in a friendly manner, but did not venture upon warmth.

Again he told his story, this time going into details, and telling a good deal about what Scatter-shot had said and done. If he was lying he did it with ease and plausibility, but the cloud of distrust before him, as expressed in his hearers' faces, did not clear away.

Later, there was a consultation between Abe, Roland and Seth, though the latter had no more to say than usual; but nothing came of it.

Close watch was kept upon Blake, but he evinced no desire to leave the lower room.

Night came again.

Blake had lamented, from the first, that Eudora Redmoor was exposed to such peril, and a few moderate allusions were made to Scatter-shot. After dark he grew gloomy and down-hearted, as far as appearance went, and again vaguely hinted that he would like company if any one of the other men was willing to take the risk.

If he intended to play on an old string he succeeded well. The Game Chicken sprung up in a rage.

"Take the risk!" he shouted. "Jabberin' jaguars! you can't lead nowhar I don't dar' ter foller. Rise up, critter, and we'll go ter that infernal town!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNEASY LIES THE CROWNED HEAD.

THE day had been one of marked events in the province of No-World Kingdom.

Shortly after breakfast the ruler of the Hermit People sent a message by a slave to his wife. It was as follows:

"King Richard sends regards to the royal

queen, and desires to know if she will grant him an audience at her earliest convenience."

When the slave brought the answer, he delivered it with some embarrassment.

"Augusta declines to look upon the face of her perfidious consort. If Richard has fully decided to replace her with her younger, more beautiful rival, the queen would prefer to receive, not the king, but the king's assassins. She is ready to die at the king's convenience, and it is to be supposed that Ilzarra will marry on the same loyal plan!"

King Richard received the venomous reply with the same patience which had marked his manner of late.

The man's hands were stained with unpardonable crimes, and he had founded the Far West kingdom in blood, but he might almost have commanded sympathy in this his hour of adversity.

He saw no hope in the future and suspected that he was a doomed man—that the next few days would see the end of his criminal, ill-directed career.

His next step was to go to Ilzarra's room. He found Zorana there. Both girls looked at him in a troubled, questioning way, but, though he noticed that the former's face was pale and haggard, and her eyes reddened as if from weeping, he made no sign. He motioned to the maid to withdraw, and he was left with Ilzarra.

"I have called to 'see you,' he remarked, his manner as vague as his words.

"Let me ask you one question!" she exclaimed, hurriedly.

"What is it?"

"Is he alive?"

"I suppose you refer to the man whom we saw in an insensible state last night?"

"Yes."

"He is alive. My men tell me that he suffered no real harm, and is as well as ever."

"Thank heaven!"

"Child, what is he to you?"

The king's voice was not unkind, and Ilzarra took courage to answer in direct words:

"He is the man I love!—the man to whom I should have been married before now only for the cruel fate that separated us."

Richard drew a deep breath.

"How did he learn that you were here?"

"I do not believe that he knew it. I have the best of reasons for believing that it was as much of a surprise to him as it certainly was to me."

"Is he really one of the Legion?"

"No," Ilzarra answered, after a little hesitation.

"Then how did he get into the palace?"

"He was disguised as one of the Legion."

"But who opened the palace doors?"

Ilzarra was not ready to answer this question, and her silence was prolonged to such an extent that Richard finally added:

"Be frank, and you will lose nothing by it. I wish to have an accurate account of last night's affair—more, I am resolved to have it. I know that your maid is devoted to you. Confess that she was the aid!"

Still, Ilzarra was reluctant to speak, and her efforts to do so resulted in a confused stammering which he interrupted:

"Enough for now. Tell me of the scene in the audience-room. When I entered, and saw Alaric and the priest, I knew what to expect. Almost crushed by my misfortunes, I looked around me to see if there was one face there that expressed pity. I saw *him*!"

Her voice failed, but her manner indicated how much the discovery had meant to her.

"What is his name?" Richard asked.

"Howell Lorme."

"You knew him of old?"

"Yes."

"If so, and you cared for him, why did you separate?"

"It was not my act, or his," she answered, quickly. "Enemies and unjust fate were against us; plots were formed against us, and we were widely separated. Then came my capture and imprisonment here. I am sure he did not know where I was."

"Then I and my men have been the means of keeping you apart all this while?"

"Yes, your Majesty; but I feel that you are not to blame for it. I was brought here by your men; I feel sure you did not plan the abduction, and had never heard of me before you saw me here."

"Of course not," the king assented, hastily.

"Now, I have a favor to ask," Ilzarra went on, quickly, imploringly. "You have been kind to me; have stood between me and Alaric for a long time. Now he has defied your authority, and tried to go contrary to all your wishes and commands. Will you endure that? Will you consider a point between a rebellious officer and a helpless girl, and decide in *his* favor? Oh king, I implore you to have mercy upon me and the man I love—Howell Lorme! Will you not set us at liberty, and enable us to go safely back to civilization? We will never give evidence against your people, and I will bless you and pray for you as long as I live!"

Ilzarra had spoken rapidly, feverishly. Her whole heart was in the appeal, for upon the result all her future, and Scatter-shot's, might

depend. Freedom, happiness—even life, was at stake.

She watched his face eagerly, but it gave her no evidence.

"What of my oath to my people?" he asked.

"Does it require you to agree to the persecution of helpless girls?"

"It forbids me to allow any outsider to leave this valley after coming in—"

"But mercy—"

"Would not be tolerated by my people?"

"And Howell Lorme—what of him? What will be his fate?" she asked, almost wildly.

"We will see."

"Oh! whatever you may do with me, I beg that you will spare him. Oh! have mercy! have mercy!"

"He still lives," Richard uneasily reminded.

"If harm comes to him I shall die! Pity me, King Richard! Look back on your days of youth. Surely you remember your mother—perhaps you had a sister—"

"No more!—no more!" hastily, hoarsely uttered the king starting nervously, and moving toward the door.

"Will you not give me one word of hope—"

"Not now! not now!"

And the king passed abruptly out of the room. Zorana was waiting outside, and, without stopping, he bade her go to her mistress. Then he continued his retreat toward his own apartments. The maid went to Ilzarra and, finding the latter in tears, put her arms around the captive's neck.

"Dear mistress, is there no hope?" she asked, in pitiful tenderness.

"I don't know, but he would make no promise."

"Was he harsh?"

"No; quite the contrary. The pity that I have often thought I could see in his manner, in the past, seemed stronger now than ever. There is much of good in the man—"

"Alas! his record does not show. Oh! if I were to tell you of the bloody deeds he has committed, you would be horrified!"

"Then why is he kind to me?"

"I don't know. Can there be a mystery?—a secret cause?"

"I know of none."

"Then I am wholly at loss."

"But I can get no promise, and I think he will stand by the laws of the Hermit People. If so, it means that I am doomed!"

A knock sounded at the door.

"Answer!" Ilzarra directed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE MEETING.

ZORANA opened the door. She saw another gray-clad female servant, a middle-aged woman, named Josephine. The latter made a gesture of caution.

"Is any one near?" she asked.

"Only my mistress."

"Zorana, are you devoted to her?"

"I am!" was the bold answer.

"For her sake, would you keep a secret that went against the powers that be?"

"That depends," Zorana answered, with a return to caution.

"Don't be afraid. You know I have been made attendant to one of the other captives?"

"Yes."

"She has convinced me. We, Zorana, ought not to turn against our own sex."

"Well?"

"My mistress wants to see your mistress. It's against orders, but I'll risk something if you will. She has asked me a million questions which I can't answer, and her grief, and her appearance of miserable health, has touched my heart. She wants to come in here. We can arrange it. Shall we?"

"What is her name?"

"Eudora Redmoor."

Not being certain that all this was in a spirit of sincerity, Zorana had studied Josephine critically, but she had decided that the latter was to be trusted. She agreed to submit the case to her mistress, and went to Ilzarra.

By chance, while referring to the female captive, she did not give her name, but Ilzarra caught eagerly at the chance to see another unfortunate.

A reply to this effect was duly given, and, a little later, Eudora entered the room.

Ilzarra looked with curiosity and eagerness. Who would the unknown prove to be? Was she old or young? Was she doomed, like herself, to a life of misery? Was she a worthy woman, with whom she could sympathize, and exchange confidences?

The light was poor, and, before she could fully distinguish what the visitor was like, she was surprised to see the latter hurry forward, drop on her knees, raise her clasped hands and exclaim in a voice which was almost a wail:

"Forgive me!—forgive me!"

Ilzarra stood dumfounded. The voice fell upon her ears with strange power, but she could not believe.

"You—you—"

Her stammering utterance was interrupted. "Forgive me!" wildly cried Eudora; "forgive, or bid me die at your feet."

"Great heavens! who are you?" Ilzarra demanded.

"Know me, if you will; forgive me, if you can!"

Ilzarra brushed the curtain away from the window, and the light fell freely upon the kneeling woman. Ilzarra recoiled.

"You here! Oh! merciful Providence, you, here!" she cried.

"Here, with all my sins."

Ilzarra went down upon her own knees, and would have put her arms around the other, but Eudora first shrunk away, and then openly repelled her.

"Don't touch me! I am not worthy of it!" she declared, while tears coursed down her face.

"Sister!"

"No; a female Judas!"

"But sister still."

"I have forfeited all claim to the tie of blood!"

The speaker still remained with clasped hands and drooping head, and refused to look at Ilzarra, but the latter, who was fast recovering, in a measure, from her great surprise, took the other's hands and firmly directed:

"Rise! No time should go to waste; give me a chance to speak with you."

Eudora obeyed. She had come with no idle motive, and was not deaf to the last argument. She stood erect, but still avoided Ilzarra's gaze.

"What evil fate has brought you here?" continued the latter.

"You name it well, but I do not come to do you injury."

"No, no. I do not mean that. I refer only to your misfortune in being a prisoner."

"I was searching for you—I and Allison Blake."

"Allison Blake!" repeated Ilzarra, her face growing hard.

"He heard of this hidden town from one of the Hermit People who was in the south of New Mexico, making purchases, and so obtained a clew to you. He told me, and asked me to follow him here; we came and, like you, are now prisoners."

"What new villainy does Blake intend?"

"I don't know, but I came to see you and beseech your forgiveness; to help you, if he tried to do you harm. Believe me, I did!"

"I do not doubt you."

"Some one else is near—can you guess who?"

"Howell Lorme?"

"Even so. He calls himself Scatter-shot, and, I know, is suffering keenly from your loss. But he is brave as a lion, and, I hope, will rescue you."

"He, too, is a prisoner."

Eudora grew pale.

"Then all hope is gone!"

"Not yet. I will not despair while life remains. Howell has friends near—brave bordermen who, I hope, will not desert us. But, my sister, I am in despair for your sake. Why did you ever come here?"

"Margera," was the quick reply, "think not of me; I care not what becomes of me. When I turned against you and, at the bidding of that base wretch, tried to ruin your life, I forfeited all claim to future happiness. Let me have no place in your thoughts except as one whose sole object in life is to see you and Horace Lorme reunited—"

Eudora stopped.

"Do not speak against yourself further, my sister. Let us forget the past and look only to the future. We are prisoners. Have you any plan of escape?"

"No."

"Have you any idea what they intend to do with you?"

"I was told that I must marry one of the Legion—I forget his name," was the apathetic reply.

"And are you willing?"

"Willing? I don't care what becomes of me!" answered Eudora, from the depths of the misery which had ruled her life so completely, before, that fresh misfortune did not influence her.

Ilzarra led her to a chair and, sitting down beside her, undertook the task of changing her mood. They were full sisters by birth, but had been reared apart, so that their acquaintance was really less than that of many casual friends. Both realized the tie of blood, however, and while Margera had been true to it, she was anxious to forget that but for Eudora her misfortunes would never have occurred, and to forgive the blows she had received.

A general conversation took place, during which Eudora heard all about Margera's situation and peril in the king's palace.

She listened to the account with close attention, but said less than was to be expected.

Every moment that the interview was prolonged was a moment of danger, for exposure might come, and this was to be avoided, if possible.

Eudora grew sagacious, and finally urged the necessity of departure. She promised to see Margera again as soon as was safe, unless it was learned that the two maids were playing false to the opposition, and the sisters agreed to study plans of relief.

Eudora returned to her own room.

Once there, she paced the floor in some excitement for several minutes, and then turned abruptly to her maid.

"I am going to marry Alaric!"

"Eh?" was the blank inquiry.

"The ruffian covets my sister. He shall not have her. The laws of No-World Kingdom forbid both a plurality of wives and divorce. If Alaric should marry me he could marry no one else, and Margera would be saved. Somehow or other—I don't know how—I am going to marry that brute!"

Allison Blake was alone in his prison-room when the door opened and King Richard appeared. The scheming knave had been downhearted, but this event cheered him up quickly and greatly. He regarded the king anxiously.

"I have been considering your proposition," Richard announced, abruptly.

"And favorably, I hope?" was the quick reply.

"You offer to deliver your former companions into my hands?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"I don't know, but I can find them."

"The leader is a certain Alkali Abe?"

"Yes."

"I'm told that he is a dangerous man."

"He is."

"Do you suppose it would cripple the opposition if he were secured?"

"I surely do."

"I will accept your offer on one condition."

"What is that, your Majesty?"

"We want no half-hearted assistants. If you help us, you must join our band. We will not have you going back to the outer world, to give evidence against us and bring soldiers down upon us."

"Rest easy on that score; I shall be glad to join your people. The outside world is not the safest place for me, and life here would just suit me."

"Then your offer is accepted."

"Good!"

"You promise to deliver Alkali Abe to me?"

"I do."

"Then you shall be released. I will contrive a way to get you to the hills so that you will not be recognized. Then you must find Alkali Abe's party and bring him here. If you fail, you may depend upon being punished."

Blake promptly reiterated that he would bring Abe. Knowing the borderman as he did, he was quite sure that he could accomplish the work.

"You shall be released within the hour. Mind you, you are to bring the man Abe only. We must divide their force, and take the others in camp."

"All shall be as you say."

"Prepare to go out."

With these words Richard left the room, but a contemptuous smile came to his face when once he was beyond Blake's sight.

"The scoundrel swallowed the bait greedily!" he muttered.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

HOW THE TRAP WORKED.

Two men approached the king's palace. Night concealed their movements and their faces, but they were Allison Blake and Alkali Abe.

"Perhaps you had better wait here, and let me go ahead and reconnoiter," suggested the former.

"Nary wait!" the Game Chicken replied, sturdily, "I ain't in this deal fur fun, an' I mean ter play the keards fur all they're worth. I suspect I ain't got no better nor a bob-tail flush, but ef it's a straight flush, I want proof on't."

"Just as you say."

"Bet yer life, it's jest as I say. I don't make no bones, Mr. A. B., o' tellin' you that I don't take no great amount o' stock in ye. You got me hyar by sort o' darin' me, an' I'll stick; but ef I find you are up ter treachery, I'll git squar' with yer or wear my feet off ter the ankle-jint, bone an' all. I reckon you hear me, eh?"

"Certainly, Mr. Partridge, but you have no cause for suspicion—"

"Lead on! lead on! Jabberin' jaguars! you talk more nor a steam injine does. Never could see the sense o' hollerin' all a body knows ter the four winds o' the'arth. I'm a man o' few words, down on braggin' an' bluffin'— Say, why a thunderation don't ye lead on?"

For once Allison Blake deserved no reproof; he was eager to get Abe into the palace, and into the trap, and only waited for the loquacious borderman to talk himself out.

They made a fresh start and approached the building. It was dark and silent, and, though the Game Chicken surveyed it closely and suspiciously, he could see nothing that confirmed his doubts of Blake.

His long, strong fingers gripped his rifle firmly, and his face might have worried Blake had that traitor seen it. Alkali Abe was walking into a trap, but he expected it, and was determined to

make things very interesting for his enemies before succumbing.

They paused in front of that rear door which had already played an important part in the drama of the palace.

It was through it that Scatter-shot had gone to captivity.

Blake had stated that a slave had been bribed to admit them, and he knocked in a peculiar way.

"How old be yer?" Abe asked abruptly.

"Eh?"

"We'll probably need our gravestones right soon, an' the age ought ter be on 'em. I'd like a pictur' of a buffler on mine, instead of a melancholy human head sech is on my gran'father's, I reckon. Put me down as being born in—"

The door opened, and they could dimly see a gray-clad figure.

"All right?" Blake asked, cautiously.

"Yes. Come in!"

The schemer moved forward agilely, and Abe followed. The sturdy borderman held his rifle tighter than ever, and his keen eyes rolled from side to side in his efforts to detect and meet any possible danger. Even then he had no thought of retreat, though as suspicious as ever.

All were soon in the building, and the door closed.

"How are things?" Blake asked.

"All right," the slave replied.

"No sign that we are suspected, eh?"

"No."

"Lead on, then!"

They started along the small hall which led to the corridor. Abe was at the rear, and he looked with close attention at the dark shadows and miniature alcoves. Lights were burning, but so faintly that they did but little good or harm.

His hearing was exerted to the utmost, and he heard a footstep which was in advance. He wheeled and saw two dark figures almost at his back.

With a long bound the veteran gained Blake's side, seized him, and swung him around so that a shield was thus formed for his own person.

"We'll settle it, right now!" he declared, in a voice which, though low, was full of stubborn resolution.

"Wh—what?" stammered Blake.

"Introduce yer friend! I don't go swingin' around the circle on a blind. Show yer hands!"

There was an awkward pause. The two skulkers and the person in gray alike stood motionless and silent, and Blake was forced to do the talking.

"Are you mad, Partridge?" he demanded.

"I'm liable ter be riled up."

"I mean, are you crazy? Why do you attack me in this rough way?"

"Because I kin see through you, yer skunk! I expected this, an' it's come; but the Game Chicken is still on the top o' the coop, an' able ter sink his spurs an' gaffles clear ter bed-rock. Show yer hands! If it's fight, wade in; I'll foller ye while the lamp holds out ter burn!"

One of the strangers spoke in a sharp voice, and the three sprung toward the resolute borderman. He swung Blake around to act as a shield still further, but, somewhat to his surprise, one of the trio dealt Blake a blow which felled him to the floor.

The trio were quickly upon Abe, and he struck out right and left, but the unexpected again happened. He who had felled Blake attacked, not the entrapped scout, but his fellow-assailants.

Before Abe could fully realize it, he and this man of strange action stood alone.

"Bind them!" the latter ordered.

"Jabberin' jaguars!"

"Fool! why do you hesitate?"

"I'm paralyzed!"

"You will be more so if you continue your idiotic course. Obey me!"

The speaker flung a coil of rope at the Game Chicken so deftly that the latter was encircled and snared as in a spider's web, and Abe hesitated no longer. Few men could do such work better than he, and he soon had Blake and the others bound and gagged.

The force of the blows given them could be imagined from the fact that all were insensible. The Game Chicken and the stranger alone remained standing.

"Now," said the latter, "are you ready to finish your work?"

"What work?"

"Don't quibble! You want to rescue your friends, and I know it. The way is open to you, but you must move quickly. Follow me!"

"Who be you?"

"Moses, the Second! I am about to lead you out of Egypt. Ask no more questions, but follow me!"

The stranger started, and Abe followed. He felt that he had encountered a gigantic, living mystery. Who was the man? The light was sufficient to show that he was masked. Why had he aided in the work? Nothing answered that inquiry, but Abe felt that he would be foolish to doubt the unknown after the evidence he had received.

He followed in silence.

Around to the corridor went the guide. He paused in front of a door and tersely explained:

"The man Scatter-shot is in this room. See! I put a key in the door and hang a white cloth upon the key. Come!"

"But—"

"Come!"

It was an authoritative command. The speaker did not wait to see if he was obeyed, but started along the corridor.

"Jabberin' jaguars! the wagon is runnin' away from me," soliloquized Alkali Abe, "but I'm bound ter ketch on ter the tail-board, an' flop my wings, an' crow like durnation. I foller!"

A short distance further went the unknown, and then he paused before another door.

"In this room is a prisoner whom you must take away. It is a lady, and I make you responsible for your conduct in the case. Take her away, at once, and guard her well. If I hear that you prove unfaithful, or if you allow her to be recaptured, you shall suffer for it. Guard her as you would your life, for if you lose the one, you will surely lose the other. See! I fit another key! Take her and the man, Scatter-shot, away immediately. If you delay, ruin will surely overtake you. Go!"

He made a fierce, sweeping gesture, and started away down the corridor.

"Hold on!" requested the Game Chicken.

"Well?"

"I'd like ter know—"

"You are to know *nothing*! Do your work and get out of this building, or, before another day's sun is at the zenith, you shall hang by the neck in the principal street of the town, an object of derision to all who see your lifeless clay!"

With this sanguinary announcement, harshly made, the stranger turned and stalked off down the corridor, as grimly, but more rapidly, than the ghost of Hamlet's father.

Alkali Abe watched him in dumfounded wonder.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" was all he could find words to say.

But Abe was not a clod, or one to lose a chance, and he speedily aroused. It was strange to find himself thus left in temporary possession of the palace, but he did not fail to improve the chance vouchsafed him. He quickly turned the key and opened the door.

He had expected to encounter a good deal of trouble, but, much to his relief, he saw "the girl in gray," Zorana, and another extremely beautiful young woman, equipped with outer garments and ready, it seemed, for flight.

Zorana's face lighted up with joy.

"It is the great border chief!" she exclaimed.

"Hustle!" was Abe's quick response. "We want ter leave on the wing, carrier pigeon style. Hustle!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

RED RIDERS COME TO BATTLE.

THE second girl, of course, was Ilzarra. She addressed Alkali Abe eagerly.

"Is the way of escape really open?"

"You bet!" he replied.

"We are all ready. My faithful Zorana accompanies me."

They started forward to the door, and, though Abe would rather have avoided an additional impediment in the shape of Zorana, he did not object.

"Slow an' soft is the programme," he announced. "Don't speak—don't think above a whisper!"

Setting a good example, he led them along the corridor until he reached Scatter-shot's room. This door he unlocked and opened. The interior was dark, but a cool voice broke the pause Abe momentarily made, with the question:

"Well, what's wanted?"

"You bet!" the Game Chicken declared.

"Jabberin' jaguars! yes—sling on yer boots an' foller me. I'm in the rescue biz!"

"Alkali Abe!"

"You bet!"

"Old friend, put it there!"

Scatter-shot had quickly gained the scout's side, and he proceeded to shake his hand heartily.

"Mum is the word, cumrade. We want ter get out at the rate o' forty mile an hour."

And another voice sounded which had power far exceeding anything Abe could say or do.

"Howell!"

"Heaven be praised!" murmured Scatter-shot, and again he clasped Ilzarra in his arms, but under circumstances far different from the encounter in the audience-room.

"Korreck, by Jericho!" the Game Chicken exclaimed. "I know jest how ye feel, fur I had two brothers who was in love. But this ain't biz! Come on; come on! We must hustle!"

"But the other prisoners!" protested Ilzarra.

"There ain't no more."

"Eudora Redmoor is here."

"Can't help it. Orders is ter skip, an' it must be done. The enemy may come down on us any minute. Hustle, I say!"

"But Eudora—"

"One thing at a time. Will ye skip out? Jabberin' jaguars! we'll all be ketched ef we stay!"

"One moment, friend Abe," Scatter-shot interrupted. "Isn't there some way to rescue the lady named?—Eudora Redmoor?"

"Not now. I ain't got any key ter her room, an' I won't lose my skulp by hangin' around hyar. I'm off! Do you foller, or not?"

The Game Chicken had grown angry, and he showed it plainly in his manner. He had neither love nor respect for Eudora, and was not willing to jeopardize all the advantage they had gained by lingering in the midst of their foes.

"You can rely upon Abe's judgment, Margera," Scatter-shot asserted. "Come! Let us go while we can, and some way shall be planned for rescuing your sister."

The idea did not please her, but, knowing as she did how carefully the doors were kept locked, she realized that no room could be opened without the proper key, without creating an alarm which would prove fatal.

She was bewildered, but, vaguely deciding that Scatter-shot and Abe must know best, she allowed the former to lead her away.

No time was lost in getting out of the palace. Alkali Abe breathed an audible sigh of relief when he found himself clear of the palace he had entered with such misgivings.

"Come on!" he directed. "The sooner we woodchucks get inter our dens, the less danger from dogs."

They were crossing the main street when a gigantic object was seen walking quietly toward them.

"The elephant, by Jericho!" Abe added. "I'm glad the critter ain't run inter no diffikilty."

The borderman's steps grew slow. He retained his old affection for Babel, and would gladly have taken him along had it not been for the fact that they could not dispose of him.

"Horsemen, too!" Scatter-shot suddenly exclaimed. "Look down the street!"

They obeyed, and saw an irregular body of riders approaching. Their movements were slow, and the only audible sound of their progress was the faint beating of the horses' feet.

"Paches!" Abe announced, abruptly.

"What are they here for?"

"Can't say, but I don't reckon it's a love-feast. As I understand it, the Alaric Legion-ites took some prisoners from 'em by force, a bit ago—Blake an' Eudora, yer know—an' the redskins must be riled. Be they here fur biz?"

"So it would seem."

"I'd like ter see 'em start a rumpuss."

The scout handled his rifle nervously. He felt a desire to fire a shot, start an alarm and see a fight between the Indians and the Hermit People, but it would not do to expose Ilzarra and Zorana to danger.

One thing was sure, however; it was not safe for the fugitives to leave the shadow of the building which sheltered them until they were sure that they would escape the keen eyes of the red-men.

The latter were looking over a region new to them, and were glad to abate their usual impetuosity and satisfy their curiosity. Never before had they been in such a place, and they gazed at the stone building in wonder.

"What is about to occur?" Scatter-shot asked.

"Eh?"

"The whole town seems to be asleep, and the Apaches are in the heart of it. What is to hinder them from making a general butchery?"

"It's possible."

"They have no rifles, and the men of the Legion are well armed. In an equal fight there could be no doubt as to the result, but, with the advantage of a surprise, all would be in the redskins' favor."

"Yes; an' they don't come in no small numbers, either. Look at 'em! That's a right smart force, an' I'd hate ter hev them after me. I reckon thar is bad blood o' the worst sort ag'in' the whites, an' they are bound ter wipe 'em out. Hullo! what now?"

There was a sudden stir among the Apaches. It began at the rear of their party, but quickly extended toward the front.

The cause was soon apparent.

There was a sound at the rear, and Alkali Abe speedily discerned other riders coming at a gallop. His first impression was that it meant more Indians, but this theory was but transient. His trained eyes detected a difference in the rapidly-moving riders and the Apaches.

"Whites, by Jericho!" he exclaimed. "Kin it be that the Legion is up an' doin', too?"

Whoever it was, they were not to be received as friends. The Apaches moved hurriedly and faced toward the south. The other party had almost reached them, but they did not wait for the arrival. Instead, they put their own horses in motion, and the deadly rivals swept toward each other at full speed.

"Hain't we better get away?" Scatter-shot asked, looking at Ilzarra, nervously.

"Wait an' see the fun!" Abe directed, swinging his rifle in a wide circle. "Jabberin' jaguars! I'd like ter be in that skirmish!"

The horses met with a tremendous shock. Grim determination was expressed on both sides,

and the result was doubtful. Arms and weapons went up, and blows were given and received.

The assailants were not disposed to neglect their advantage, and they began to use their rifles. The reports sounded unusually low to the excited spectators.

"It'll wake up the whole town," muttered Abe.

Perhaps the same idea occurred to the Apaches, for they suddenly threw caution to the winds, and their war-whoops and discordant yells mingled with the sound of firing. Who was getting the best of the struggle could not be told; it was only a confused mass.

"Come!" urged Scatter-shot. "It is madness to remain here. We are fully exposing the non-combatants to danger."

The borderman remonstrated no further. He was anxious to see the fight, but realized that the girls had claims not to be overlooked.

He again led the way, and they receded from the town as fast as possible. But they could not leave the hubbub; the rival parties were making a great din, and the flashing of lights showed that the Hermit People were arousing.

Probably they thought that night alarms were becoming painfully common.

When the entrance to the smaller valley was reached Abe sent the others on toward the temple, while he climbed to the elevated point to see the fight out.

He saw more of it than he had expected, for a building had been set on fire, by accident or design, and the flames made a light in which the rivals could be seen contending like wild animals.

There was no system on either side; each man fought for himself, and struck out wherever he found a foe.

Abe, however, noticed that the Apaches were giving ground. The rifles of the white foe had told upon both their numbers and their courage, and they were being forced back a little at a time.

As the men of the Legion were constantly receiving recruits, the result did not seem doubtful.

"Go it!" the Game Chicken directed, gleefully. "Fight dog, tight devil, you're both off the same reel, an' the more yer back each other up, the better!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MYSTERY OF THE PALACE.

For some time Alkali Abe had not thought of Babel, the elephant; but Babel had not yet retired from the stage. Where he had been for the last few minutes was not certain, but he suddenly made himself visible.

Abe discovered him first in the middle of the street, moving toward the fighting men at a good pace, and waving his trunk in a suggestive way.

"Another figger fur the dance!" chuckled the borderman. "Babel's got his mad up, an' of he don't give 'em some p'int in boxin', I'm a liar!"

Straight ahead went the elephant. The warriors, white and red, appeared not to have seen him, but he burst into their fighting tangle impetuously. Trumpeting his anger he struck out right and left with his trunk, and, never checking his speed, knocked them around like the blocks of a toy-house.

When he had gone entirely through he turned back, but a change had come over the valiant men-of-war.

They no longer seemed to feel a martial spirit; some were in retreat, the others had left off fighting each other. One or two of the Legion men tried a shot at Babel, but this only made him all the more furious.

He made another charge, and away went the men in all directions. The Apaches fled toward the hills, and the Legionites to their various places of refuge. The sight was so absurd that Abe dropped his rifle and laughed long and loud.

"Never seen the like of it!" he gasped. "Ef they was women, 'flicted with sech a panic, everybody would feel bound to snicker, but what o' able-bodied men doin' it? It's a panic o' the worst sort. It's consarned funny. Babel rules the roost! He's the best man o' that gang, fur sure. But I'm sort o' sorry the reds has been whipped!"

He gazed at the surviving Apaches, who were urging their horses on toward the hills at a mad gallop, and then looked back at the town.

Babel was king! He was stalking up and down the now deserted street, having relapsed into a measure of his old dignity, but certain signs about him indicated that he was still in a vicious mood, and liable to break out afresh.

Abe was in great fear lest the Legionites should fire upon the animal, but Babel settled all questions by taking a new freak into his head. He turned suddenly to the left, swung his trunk once as a parting salute, perhaps, and then trotted away into the darkness.

"The show's over," muttered the Game Chicken, "an' I reckon the gang will want ter see me. I'll go!"

He descended, and made his way to the ruined temple. All of his companions were gathered in

the sacred room. He made his report in a few words, and then abruptly demanded:

"What's the scheme ahead? Do we stay hyar, or do we hustle fur other climes?"

"What do you advise?" Scatter-shot asked.

"I think this place is about as safe as a den o' jaguars. Allison Blake is dead sure ter give us away. I don't understan' the biz at the palace, but Blake did his level best ter betray me ter the Philistines. He's a skunk an' a traitor!"

"I don't doubt that, but it may still be possible for us to remain in the temple. If we take to the hills we shall be in constant danger from the Apaches, as well as from the Legion; and Zorana has just confessed that there is a secret room beyond this. She did not tell us before, for she was reluctant to reveal all she knew, but she sees Margera—her mistress—in peril, and will keep nothing back."

"We'll see the room."

"One moment. How do you explain the affair at the palace? Who was your aid?"

"Dunno, by Jericho!"

"Can it have been King Richard?"

"Why should it be?"

"Margera and Zorana think so."

"Then he went dead ag'in' his gang."

"Margera believes that he deliberately planned to rescue us."

"It seems powerful queer, but I admit it must 'a' been somebody o' no mean importance. He had means o' doin' all he wanted done, an' he put on airs of authority fit fur a re'el king."

"It was Richard!" Margera murmured.

"Then it must be dry weather som'ers, 'cordin' ter the old sayin'; fur all signs fail. Jabberin' jaguars! he help beat hisself?"

"Richard is a strange man."

"Should say so."

"I have heard many tales of his sanguinary career, and Zorana knows them to be true; but to me he has been kind and pitiful. Strange man!"

"I s'pose you sent Blake here?" Abe dryly questioned, addressing Scatter-shot.

"I? Certainly not."

"He said so."

"He spoke falsely."

"Then who did? Who could, an' would dare, but that thar same king?"

"If our theory is correct, it was a plot on his part by which he lured you to the palace, ostensibly to capture you, but, really, to work the scheme for our rescue, which was actually carried out."

Abe rubbed his bearded chin, and twisted his mouth around to one side, in a grimace, until there seemed danger that it would reach his ear.

"A condemn'd queer sort of a king!" he commented.

"Beyond doubt, he is that."

"Do ye allow that Blake was in it?"

"Decidedly not! That prince of knaves was made a cat's-paw—that is, if we are right."

"Zackly! Jes' sol Indubitblum!" quoth Abe, in good-humored unbelief.

"Let that be as it may, I think we are agreed upon the necessity of getting to a safer place without delay. As Blake has been here once he can lead the way again, and there is no knowing how soon he will do it."

"Unless his head is broke, which same I devoutly hope fur, by Jericho!" the borderman declared.

Zorana was directed to show the way to the secret room, and she did so at once. Some time before she had discovered that a part of the altar, or whatever it had been, was movable, and could be swung around like a door. This was now moved, and, carrying their lights, they went down several stone steps to a narrow passage.

Thirty feet away they reached the secret room.

If the statues of the first room had represented priests of the lost people, it seemed that they had been buried in the place now reached.

It was long and narrow, and lined on each side with oblong stone boxes. That they had been receptacles for the dead no one doubted, and Scatter-shot was impressed by their resemblance to the sarcophagi of the Old World, which he had seen at various times.

"I've seen more cheerful places," Abe admitted, after a long look.

"We are not to stay here," explained Zorana.

"The room is double. See!"

She conducted them to the second half, which was free from all relics of death, and a place which met the approval of all. What means of giving air originally existed was not apparent, but one wall was sufficiently rent and shaken to admit it, now, and make the room wholesome.

"Jest the figger!" Abe declared. "We kin bring in the moss and be as snug as you please."

This was the opinion of all, and the sacred room was soon stripped of every sign of recent occupancy.

The Game Chicken and Silent Seth held a conference, the result of which was that the former announced their intention of going out again. The party needed food. From Zorana the borderman had learned that the Hermit People kept a magazine in which a large quantity of catables was stored. He argued that no

effort there would be expected, and that a bold attempt at that juncture would supply them with enough to last several days.

If the chance was neglected, they would have to rely upon the results of their own hunting ventures, and that would be far more risky.

There was some opposition, but Abe carried his point, and he and Seth went away.

Scatter-shot and Ilzarra improved the chance to speak of the past. They had a good deal to say, for there were pages in the book of the past which were dark, mysterious and full of gloom, but Roland Ludlow, watching with friendly interest, saw there was no doubt or hesitation in their manner.

Roland and Ariadne tried to make Zorana feel at ease. The "girl in gray" had been born and reared in No-World Kingdom, and it was no small matter to break away, but she accepted the situation calmly.

Yorick Laffingman was silent and wretched, and so overcome with fear that he was little better than a log.

Abe and Seth were successful. In due time they returned well laden with food, and the prospects for the future brightened accordingly.

They reported that the town had grown quiet again, and that they saw none of the enemy near the ruined city.

Later, all of the fugitives lay down. The movable altar was considered enough of a guard, for it was not believed that any one but Zorana had known of the sacred room, much less of the altar.

Scatter-shot slept—he dreamed. He imagined that he was being rocked in a gigantic cradle. Perhaps the motion was too rough, for he awoke.

But the motion remained. The floor upon which he lay was moving under him strangely, and he heard the voice of Alkali Abe excitedly announce:

"Jabberin' jaguars! it's an 'arthquake!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE EARTHQUAKE.

ALL of the fugitives sprang to their feet. Nature did, indeed, appear to be in a convulsion. The floor shook under their feet, and the foundations of the temple heaved until the whole ruin was like a thing of life. A rumbling sound grated upon the ear, as the big building-stones moved one upon the other.

"An 'arthquake, by Jericho!" added Alkali Abe.

His voice was not indicative of fear, but there were some present who could not accept the situation so coolly.

Before they could speak, however, there was a fresh, violent tremor; the floor seemed to slide out from under their feet; and all were flung down unceremoniously.

They scrambled to their feet as soon as possible and Yorick was heard praying in feverish and incoherent haste, but the ebullition of Nature had subsided. The rumbling sound was gone, and so was the dizzy swaying of the floor.

"All correct!" the Game Chicken said, calmly. "The shaker is shook out!"

"But it may come again," suggested Scatter-shot.

"Let us go out!—let's go out!" cried Yorick, shrilly.

"Nary go!" the borderman sturdily returned. "We don't run from a trifle like this."

"The temple will be shook down, an' crush us."

"You don't mind a small thing like that, do yer, Laffingman?"

"Remember the fate of the old city," urged Scatter-shot.

"Do you say go out?"

"I leave it wholly to you."

"I say stay."

"But it was an earthquake," reminded Ludlow.

"It was a small shaker, but, jabberin' jaguars! thar may not be another fur a hundred year. We won't run, fur we can't find no better place. I reckon the old temple will stand, though it *did* creak an' groan like a vessel in a storm."

He picked up several pieces of stone which had rattled down from the old rent in the wall.

"Quite a shaker!" he admitted.

The tremor had entirely subsided, but even Abe was not at ease. Some time in the far past an earthquake had occurred which had been severe enough to wipe a city out of existence, and leave nothing by which its former size could be estimated.

How many convulsions the valley had since seen could not be told, but, as far as the present was concerned, it was plain that others might follow the first, and be severe enough to shake down the temple and bury the fugitives under it.

The refuge had lost its charms, and no word of remonstrance would have sounded if Alkali Abe had ordered a retreat to the hills.

This he did not do. After having prepared for a siege, he was determined not to desert the temple, unless absolute necessity required it.

When half an hour had passed without any disturbance, Abe and Scatter-shot went out to see if any effects of the shock were noticeable. They found none, and the ruins were as silent and deserted as ever.

The remainder of the night passed uneventfully.

If there was anything worth seeing outside during the ensuing day, it remained unknown to the fugitives. It was agreed that they could not be too careful, and no one ventured out.

Scatter-shot improved the chance to examine the room of sepulture, and look at each sarcophagus. In the latter there was little to reward him, for only a dust-like substance was inside. This may have been the natural accumulation of time. He suspected that the stone coffins had originally been filled with some substance that quickly consumed all relics of mortality confided to them.

The only important discovery was a large slab of polished stone set in the eastern wall. Upon it the sculptors of the lost race had done their work.

At the extreme top was a series of engraved lines which might be intended for the rays of the sun, or, possibly, some symbol of heaven. And over the surface were numerous shadowy figures, winged and crowned, and not unlike the representations of angels known to the people of the present day and their direct ancestors.

All these figures were vague and dim with one exception.

In the center was a form—like the others, made to represent a female, it would seem—which had been boldly engraved. The face was fairly symmetrical, and the work better than that on the statues of the sacred room. The figure was heavily veiled, but a pair of well-rounded arms had been thrown out of the wrappings and were extended, the one pointing upward; the other, downward.

The face, too, was turned so that the eyes looked down, and the whole was so suggestive that Scatter-shot was led to an immediate opinion—the angelic figure was pointing to Heaven, and putting an injunction upon the people of the earth.

What was the injunction? Was it a command to hearken to the decrees of Heaven, and to observe them?

What had been the religion of the lost people? Had it been idolatry, sun-worship, or true religion? He believed that the destruction of the old city must date back of the discovery of America by Columbus.

Was it possible that, between the beginning of the Christian era and the year 1492, the true religion had been introduced to the New World?

A wide field of conjecture was opened, but Scatter-shot found himself surmising that, long before—perhaps over a thousand years—the ancestors of the lost race had in some now-unknown way come from Europe, or from Asia, and brought with them their religion and their civilization. The art of navigation was more or less known even in the days of Solomon, to whom "once in three years came the navy of Tharsish," with treasures from abroad.

Perhaps a vessel, or vessels, strong enough to withstand the ocean storms, had crossed long before Columbus, or his possible predecessors, Hiram and Lief, and Eric the Red, and the Northmen of the Ninth Century, ever dreamed of a land toward the setting sun.

It was a fascinating speculation, and Scatter-shot experienced not a little irritation when Abe practically viewed the stone tablet and characteristically added his views.

"Hevin' a reg'lar jubilee, ain't they? That female in the foreground ain't a bad specimen, but she looks sort o' stony. 'Tain't ter my taste ter be flyin' around thusly, but women is nat'rally giddy an' light-headed. Thar ain't no feet on the pesky critters, nohow, an' I reckon they was the reg'lar mode o' travel. Wal, wal, what fools them old-timers was, ter spend their time makin' statoes, and hackin' pictur's on rocks. We ought ter be thankful we live in civilized days, when sech things ain't done!"

Scatter-shot vouchsafed no reply, and soon went to the other room, but he could not forget the puzzle of the lost race.

There lay the ruins of a volume of history which no living man knew.

In the evening the Game Chicken went on a scouting expedition, but without seeing any sign of the enemy. He did not go to the town; what he wanted was to make sure that they were not near the ruined temple.

The borderman was not satisfied with the air or the appearance of the spy. Although he had no past experience to go by, he could not help feeling that the state of Nature, which was unnatural in both the respects indicated, presaged fresh earthquake shocks.

He did not mention his vague fears to his companions.

All retired for the night as usual.

And again their awakening was rude!

The night was well advanced when a slight tremor ran along the earth. Others followed like the waves of the ocean; the walls of the temple began to shake, grind and rattle.

The refugees aroused. No one needed an explanation, this time, nor required to be told that the shock was heavier than the one of the previous night.

The walls seemed literally to dance; a crash—outside told of dislodged, falling buildings—

stones; and small pieces began to rattle down around the fugitives.

"Run!" cried Alkali Abe. "Skip for the outside world!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

ABE BECOMES AN ELEPHANT-TAMER.

No one hesitated to obey the Game Chicken's direction; the bravest of the party were filled with fear.

The floor was swaying dizzily under their feet, and the crashing outside told that the old temple was going to pieces. How long the demolition would continue was not certain, but a violent convulsion might at any moment bring down the whole building in a shapeless heap.

That meant that they would be crushed or buried alive.

Again, they had not forgotten the optical evidence that, during some former earthquake, the rocks of the hills had actually moved in a mass and, cutting down the northern part of the city like grain under the sickle, obliterated it from the surface of the earth.

They started, and no one lagged on the journey.

Up past the movable altar and through the sacred room they went, and the ground floor of the temple was soon reached.

A wild scene was revealed.

The usual darkness of night was lessened by a strange, yellow light which fell upon all things about the valley, and by it one could see the walls of the temple crumbling piece by piece. Large building-stones, dislodged, fell with a crash, here and there, and the place was hardly recognizable.

Alkali Abe swung his arm around Zorana.

"Foller me!" he ordered. "Look out fur the fallin' dornicks, or you'll git a toenail smashed right off. Jabberin' jaguars!"

The exclamation was forced from him as he was flung against the wall with force which made him grimace, but he rallied and kept on his way.

None of the party ever had any clear idea of how they cleared the ruins, for it was a wild and dangerous race, but get clear they did.

Just as they reached the larger valley the tremors ceased.

"By Jericho! that beats the record!" Abe asserted. "My gran'father, Eliphaz Partridge, run the gantlet among the Injuns in Kentucky, an' wambasted old Tecumseh right on the smeller; but we kin give the old gentleman odds, an' beat his race. Yes, you bet!"

"A close call!" Scatter-shot admitted, supporting the trembling Ilzarra.

"All quiet now."

"Yes, but not to be trusted. As a rule, I think earthquake convulsions last less than two minutes. We have been under fire several minutes. This shows that the matter is serious, and more shocks are to be expected."

"Ef we had hosses enough, I should be in favor of gettin' them, an' makin' a break fur the outer world—though I s'pose we might manage ter gobble some quadrupedles from the enemy."

"I will not leave here until Eudora, my sister, is rescued!" declared Ilzarra.

Abe heaved a big sigh.

"Them sentiments ain't mine," he admitted.

"Recollect, Margera—"

So began Scatter-shot, but Ilzarra interrupted:

"She is my sister, and, if she has erred, is deeply repentant. I should never forgive myself if I deserted her in her hour of trial."

"So be it," agreed the Game Chicken. "We will hold ter our grip, though my judgment cries out ag'in' it like a lost child in a thistle-bed. How we are ter defy both Legion men an' Apaches, without any cover fur our head, does beat me. But, come on; we'll do the best we kin."

He led the way, and they passed along the east side of the valley, crossed the stream, and went to the southern hills.

There, Abe and Seth looked for a new refuge, and were fortunate enough to find one which, under ordinary circumstances, would have been satisfactory.

No more terrestrial tremors were felt.

The night ended peacefully, but day brought fresh perplexities, as well as dangers. They were without food, and to hunt in the hills where Legionites and Apaches were to be looked for, as neighbors, was certainly very risky. Food must be had, however, and Abe improved the first gleams of day to use his rifle. Game was secured, and breakfast, such as it was, duly prepared and eaten.

They were discussing the matter, a little later, when the elephant, Babel, came slowly toward them. Ariadne gave a little cry, and Abe seemed scarcely less delighted.

"Hold up the critter!" he directed, addressing the ex-Queen of Elephants. "He's bigger nor a house, but his powerful fighting qualities offset it. Let's keep him with us; he'll make us a right smart lot o' fun."

Ariadne advanced, and Babel recognized her and, stopping, graciously allowed her to lavish attentions upon him. She had performed with him many times in the circus-ring, and it was pleasant to see him again.

Abe viewed the new-comer with unfailing admiration.

"Tame an' gentle as a kitten, ain't he?" the veteran exclaimed. "Wish I had sech a boss! Stand back, gal, an' let me handle him a bit. I want ter see how that funny hide o' his feels!"

"You had better not; he don't like strangers," Ariadne replied.

"Oh! I'll charm him. Never seen a boss I couldn't subdue, an' an elephant is a good deal like them. Whoa, Babel!"

The borderman put on a professional air, and advanced close to the elephant. Ariadne said no more, but she had a strong impression that the rash investigator would come to grief.

"Hyar ye hev a great curiosity—an elephant in the Far West!" declared Alkali Abe, with a wide gesture, and an air like a ring-master's. "Look on the noble sojourner from—whar did he hail from? Never mind; I'll show ye my power over the wild denizens o' the woods. I'll tame him!"

He went nearer. Babel maintained his air of dignity, but there was something more than peace and good will in his small eyes.

"Whoa, mustang!" quoth the borderman, facetiously. "Happy ter meet ye! Got yer trunk all packed, I see. Lemme 'check' it fur Los Angeles!"

Smiling in good-humored appreciation of the situation, he reached out to begin familiarities, but this was just what the elephant did not intend to allow.

There was a sudden movement of Babel's trunk, and then it closed around the Game Chicken like a big snake.

The veteran uttered a cry, but Babel gave him a "switch" as if he was a wisp of hay, and then flung him down on the ground with a thud.

This done, he stood with fresh dignity, while unlucky Mr. Partridge, severely shaken, but not seriously injured, struggled up on his elbows and gazed in dumfounded surprise and consternation.

He could hardly understand what had occurred.

"Is he fully tamed?" asked Ludlow, laughing.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" Alkali Abe gasped, "what durned critter has descended on the Wild West?"

"Possibly a kitten, for we have your word that he is as tame and gentle as that animal."

"Tame! Gentle! Why, the condemn'd critter has broke my backbone. D'ye see the pieces scattered around anywhar? Gentle! Why, I'd rather fight a jaguar any time."

"But you are going to tame him, you know."

"I don't know it; not by a long shot! I'll let him alone ef he will me. I'm tamed, an' he's the tamer. Jabberin' jaguars! how he did smash me down!"

The borderman turned over and retreated on his hands and knees to a safe distance. Then he arose, felt of his most important bones, and ruefully added:

"Don't let this git abroad. Ef 'twas knowed that the Game Chicken of Texas had been used so p'izonly, I could never hold my head up among my comrades ag'in. Never!"

His distress was so unfeigned and deep that Ariadne took a hand and did what she could to soothe him, but his admiration for Babel had gone completely.

Silent Seth went to take a look at the valley, but gained no light thereby.

The Hermit People were astir, but, as far as could be seen, like honest men and women only. There was no sign that they were alarmed by the recent earthquake, or meditating hostilities against the smaller party.

The latter were not deceived, and they took every precaution they could. This meant but little. Their situation was not such as to give Abe any confidence, nor could it be improved.

As time wore on he regretted more and more that he had allowed his judgment to be overruled in the matter of leaving the vicinity. Every hour they remained would be one of peril, and he did not think the whole party ought to be jeopardized for Eudora Redmoor's sake.

The forenoon passed.

Later, when they were keeping quiet in their retreat, the dog Lazarus suddenly started up with a growl. Nothing was to be seen, but when the Game Chicken addressed him his aspect only grew the more ominous.

Abe raised his rifle.

"It's some enemy," he announced, "an' I hope ter gracious it don't mean ruin. Shall I go ter scout? Or would I only make a bad matter worse?"

The words had barely passed his lips when a man in gray-and-orange garb suddenly sprung out from behind the rocks, and several more followed in quick succession until the gap was filled.

The Legion was there, and their attention was upon the fugitives!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DOOM PRONOUNCED.

ALARIC was at the head of the hostile force. He shouted a command, and the Legion darted upon the smaller party, ten men to one.

They met with no feeble or half-hearted resistance.

With rifle and revolver they were received, and Abe, Seth, Scatter-shot and Roland stood firm, but the assailants, aiming not to massacre but to capture, flung themselves upon the quartette and beat them down by the very weight of their bodies, in pounds and ounces.

Even then it was not over. Not one of the four but was fit to fight for his life at any time, and the fact was proven now. The mass of struggling men rolled back and forth like a leviathan in its death-throes, and it was long before quiet was restored.

When it was done Abe and his friends were prisoners, one and all.

But it had been a costly triumph, and there were many who would not ride with the Legion for many days to come. Others would ride no more.

Alaric was in a rage, and would gladly have disposed of the male prisoners there and then, but he had received strict orders in the case, and knew that the greater part of his followers were true to King Richard.

It would not do to make any break.

The return to the town was made at once, but the lack of exhilaration among the men of the Legion would have made it hard to tell, from the manner of the two parties, which were the victors. Reaching the palace, Alaric sent word to the king, and received this message in reply:

"Take them to the audience-room, and remain until I come!"

The order was obeyed, and the prisoners duly placed there.

Ilzarra and Ariadne had temporarily lost their courage, and were down-hearted to an extreme, but Abe, Scatter-shot, Roland and Seth did not give a sign of fear. All showed marks of hard usage, and there was not one but had received more or less wounds, but none was seriously injured, and they faced the enemy boldly.

Yorick was almost helpless with fear.

In due time King Richard came, attended by several men whose garbs of gray and blue told that they were of the "nobility." Slaves brought up the rear.

The king was strikingly, if not richly, clad in robes of gray and scarlet, and certainly made an impressive appearance. The prisoners studied his face in a vain attempt to detect a sign of pity; he did not look at them, and took his place on the judgment-seat as calmly as though he had been a police-judge about to hear cases against offenders charged with the most petty misdemeanors.

Even then he looked, not at the anxious captives, but at Alaric.

"Centurion," he began, calmly, "I have cause to congratulate you upon your great work. You have won a noble triumph."

Alaric bowed in stately fashion.

"You are kind, King Richard," he returned.

"It is only in keeping with your usual work."

"Do you know," asked the centurion, with sudden fierceness, "what this victory has cost?"

"I am told that our men suffered severely."

"There is a big gap in the Legion—"

"You can give particulars in the usual way."

Richard turned toward the prisoners and regarded them with cold severity.

"Did any escape you, centurion?"

"No."

"Then we will wipe their very names from the memory of men. Every male here shall die!"

He extended his hand toward the captives.

"The measly skunk!" muttered Abe, but Scatter-shot gave the borderman a warning touch.

Both he and Ilzarra believed that the king was their secret friend, and was willing to let him act his part so that the Hermit People would be fully deceived.

"Will you order them slain at once?" asked Alaric, eagerly.

"I think we will not depart from our usual rule of three days of grace."

"But they may escape."

"Not so! I shall take full charge of the matter, and you may rest assured that there will be no escape. Do you hold these men equally guilty?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Set them before me!"

Abe, Seth, Scatter-shot, Roland and Yorick were placed in a line before the judgment-seat. Richard looked at them with pitiless severity.

"Men," he said, after a pause, "whatever fate you may meet is of your own seeking. You had the whole globe for your occupancy and use, except the small limits of No-World Kingdom. You came here and arrayed yourselves as the foes of the Hermit People. The blood of noble men is upon your hands. What saith the old law? 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth!' Like deserves like. Life demands life; death calls for death. It is the sentence of the royal ruler of No-World Kingdom that, three days hence, you shall all be hanged by the neck, and left seven days as a warning to other interlopers!"

Yorick gave a shrill cry and fell upon his knees.

"No, no, no!" he shrieked. "Save us!—spare us!"

"So!" coldly uttered Richard; "the craven blood shows!"

Alkali Abe raised his foot and spurned Yorick with such force that the unhappy ex-clown fell sprawling upon the floor.

"Don't you swallow yer teeth, instead o' yer feed!" exclaimed the Game Chicken, belligerently. "Don't yer jedge us by that whimperin' gutter-snipe! Craven! Who's a craven? Say, you, Mister King, ef you or any man in yer whole durned army o' beggarly loafers wants ter tackle me, let him ante up. I'll fight him with any weapon from a rifle down ter muskies. Coward? The man who says it is a liar! Chaw that, will yer?"

The sturdy borderman's ire was fully aroused, and, unheeding Scatter-shot's efforts to check him, he rolled out his defiance in a way quite natural to a rough, brave man who thought his valor questioned.

King Richard regarded him with cold unconcern.

"The fellow will talk less, four days hence!" he significant, icily observed.

"I shall be a-talkin' when this measly, one-hoss village is a flat ruin!" Abe asserted.

"As for the women," pursued the king.

Alaric listened eagerly. When he went so rebelliously against Richard as to try to marry Ilzarra in defiance of the ruler's plans he had expected the severest of reproofs, to say the least. The matter, however, had been ignored. He was eager to hear what the king would say now.

"The former decrees will be carried out," Richard calmly continued. "On the fourth day hence the two, Ilzarra and Ariadne, will marry the men who have chosen them. Has any one aught to say?"

Alkali Abe started forward.

"I want ter say—"

"Be silent! As prisoners, you have *nothing* to say. You will not be heard. I referred to my followers."

"But I want ter say—"

"Take all the prisoners away," pursued Richard, ignoring the Game Chicken. Put these two men"—pointing to Abe and Scatter-shot—in one room, and the other three in another. The two women will also be kept together."

He changed his gaze to Zorana.

"Here," he added, "we have the first one of the Hermit People who has ever proved to be a traitor. She is a maid of some comeliness and intelligence, and was born in this valley. Much do I regret that she has gone astray, but it has been her own doing. She shall be imprisoned with the two women she has seen fit to take as associates, but her case must be made the subject of special consideration when the others are settled. How say you, my lads?"

He turned graciously to the men in gray and blue, and those so-called nobles, glad to come out of the depressing air of nonentity, eagerly replied in chorus:

"Your Majesty is quite right."

"Enough, then. Let my orders be obeyed to the letter. You, Alaric, I hold responsible!"

Rising, the king descended and left the room. His expression was cold and forbidding, and he did not even glance at the prisoners. Even Scatter-shot's confidence wavered.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A TERRIBLE DISCOVERY.

"ANOTHER day of captivity before us?"

"Another day? Yes; and how many more?"

"Providence knows; I don't."

"The end must come soon. Two days hence, if the king's decree is carried out, Alkali Abe and his brave companions are to die. After that comes our fate! Think of it!—think of it!"

"No; do not think of it!"

"How can I do otherwise? But one thing is sure; I shall not, and will not, endure life under the conditions decreed. Marry one of those crime-stained brutes? Never! never! My own hand shall take my life, first."

"Be calm, Ariadne. Hope is not yet gone."

"It is wholly gone!"

"And I say that I still believe in King Richard!"

The speakers were Ilzarra and Ariadne. It was the day after the fresh return to their prison. During the past night the three girls, utterly wearied out, had slept soundly. They awoke somewhat refreshed, but keenly alive to the dangers of their situation.

Ariadne shook her head.

"I have no faith in your theory, Ilzarra. There may have been good cause, in the appearance of things, to think that the mysterious helper was the king, but his manner when he pronounced our sentence revealed the mistake. Ice, or rock could, could not be harder than the heart he revealed. He is pitiless; he is inexorable!"

Ilzarra sighed and did not reply. There were times when her own faith in King Richard wavered; when it seemed utter folly and madness to believe that he did feel pity.

"My memory goes back to my childhood," Ariadne continued. "I was a farmer's daughter,

I longed for something more thrilling in life; I became a circus performer. And this is the end."

"Can you tell your story in as few words as that?"

"Yes. But you—" Ariadne looked at her companion with more eagerness—"there is a secret past in your life. You are not Ilzarra, but Margera Redmoor, and Eudora is your sister. Scatter-shot is not thus named, but Howell Lorme. You knew him of old; you loved each other; you were separated. What does it all mean?"

Ilzarra was silent for a moment, and then she replied:

"You shall hear my story; it will relieve me to tell it, and if, by any chance, you should escape and I should not, you might make the story, and my fate known. But I hope we may all escape."

"My home was in the State of Iowa. Three years ago I was living there with a family who were my personal friends. I was an orphan."

"My father, Eaton Redmoor, had been a wild and reckless man. I am told that he was never dissipated or criminal, and despised a mean act, but he was, as he often told my mother, 'half eagle and half Gypsy.'"

"He could not settle down to quiet life, and did not. He engaged in wild and daring work, as a means of livelihood, and was finally killed in an accident."

"My mother was a kind, patient woman whom I remember with the tenderest love. She was left in hopeless poverty, with two children—Eudora and myself—and died when I was ten years old."

"Some time before that Eudora, who was older than I, had been taken on partial adoption by a family in Missouri."

"I saw her but twice between my eighth and nineteenth years, and then only for a few days. Thus, we were sisters with an acquaintance only casual."

"Three years ago she paid me the third visit of our divided lives. At that time I was, as I thought, to be married inside of six months. My chosen husband was Howell Lorme. You have seen him, and I will not try to describe him further than to say that I thought then, as I do now, that he was the noblest of men."

"I had had another suitor named Allison Blake. Both he and Howell Lorme were engaged in business which kept them away from the town a good deal, and, as Blake was almost a new-comer, it so happened that they did not meet."

"I never liked Blake, but, when I would not accept his company, he persisted in forcing his attentions upon me at every chance—not rudely, but with a degree of courtesy, I admit."

"When Eudora came she saw and, to speak plainly, at once fell in love with Howell. He never gave her any more attention than he thought due my sister, but she, disregarding the relationship, persistently and boldly tried to win him from me."

"She did not succeed; he never wavered."

"After awhile, I noticed that Eudora and Allison Blake were together a good deal. I then thought that they might give up their previous ideas and conclude to marry, but their object was very different."

"The wild Redmoor blood was working within her, and working evilly."

"They had determined to part Howell and me."

"The day for my marriage to Howell was set. Blake was, I thought, out of town. The guests gathered, but I was not there. I had disappeared, and in my room was a brief note, directed to Howell, which, seemingly in my writing, stated that I had changed my mind and, not wishing to marry him, had gone to another town—no name given."

"The plotters had cunningly avoided any hint at elopement, but Howell was not deceived; from the first, he declared that there had been foul play. He had search made for me—a vain search."

"The truth was as follows:

"Blake and Eudora had abducted me—or, rather, had planned the abduction and had others execute it; for they were careful to be able to prove an *alibi*. Their purpose was merely to separate Howell and me, but their scheme miscarried fatally."

"We lived in a country sparsely settled, and while my abductors were hurrying me away, they were attacked by other men—lawless fellows, who were semi-bandits."

"I was taken to the Southwest, and passed through many wild scenes I will not pause to relate. I was, in turn, captive to the outlaws, to Apache Indians, and to the Hermit People."

"Such, in brief, was my experience."

"Howell searched for me two years without getting any clue. Then, utterly discouraged, he became a wanderer in the wildest portion of the Southwest. Providence led him here, and, much to our mutual surprise, we met."

"He had always suspected Blake and Eudora."

"As for Eudora, I believe she has suffered severely ever since her plan so miscarried. She had been wicked enough to scheme to separate Howell and me, but when she found that I had

fallen into other hands, and was in peril, all was changed.

"She hid her secret for awhile; then she and Blake disappeared at about the same time.

"They had gone to search for me.

"Blake wished to find me, I believe, so that he could pose as a hero in my sight; Eudora, I feel sure, had no selfish motive. They searched, but it was long before they learned anything. The first clew came from one of the Legion, who, being in a town to purchase supplies, drank too much liquor and babbled secrets.

"Eudora insisted upon following up the clew. A guide was engaged, and she and Blake started.

"It was a mad venture, as she has since seen.

"Their guide was killed by Apaches, and they wandered about in the hills, in constant danger, until captured by Alaric's men.

"'Twas a strange chance that brought us all together here; it would be stranger should we all get away alive. Poor Eudora! Her worn, haggard, prematurely-aged face tells what she has suffered, and I pity her deeply. Her small sin recoiled upon herself and became a great punishment. What torturelike mental anguish, remorse and unavailing regret?"

"I can't see why you should call her sin small!" remonstrated Ariadne. "I should say she was a fiend!"

"Don't say it, my friend! The sin she planned was small in comparison to the consequences, and I believe she has suffered more than I. I prefer to forgive her—as much as I can. She has been punished already; her face shows it."

Ariadne did not feel inclined to take such a forgiving view of the case, though she freely admitted that Eudora appeared to have suffered greatly.

At this juncture dinner was brought in, and the three captives ate heartily. When they had finished Zorana observed:

"Something about the food seems to leave a bitter taste in my mouth."

"I notice the same thing," added Ariadne.

No more was said at the time, but the fact was soon recalled forcibly. At the end of half an hour each of the girls began to feel a sharp pain in her stomach. No comment was made for some time, but when Ariadne mentioned it, they discovered that all were similarly afflicted.

At the end of ten minutes more the pain became severe.

"Something was wrong with the food," said Ariadne.

"Merciful Heaven!" gasped Zorana.

"What is it?"

"We are *poisoned*!"

"Poisoned!"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"What else can it be? Are you so blind that you cannot guess the truth?"

"Explain!" Ilzarra quickly directed.

"You have an enemy here who has tried to take your life before. She has now tried again. Don't you see? Queen Augusta has poisoned us!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE POISON AND THE PLEDGE.

ZORANA started to her feet.

"The doctor!" she added, excitedly. "We must give the alarm and have help, or we shall die like miserable dogs. It may not be too late to save us!"

She ran to the door and began to pound upon it with all her strength, calling for help as she did so. One of the Legion had been placed on guard outside, and he opened the door.

"The king!" cried Zorana. "We are poisoned! Send for him at once, or it will be too late!"

It needed but one glance at the faces of the girls to discover that they were in a genuine panic, and his own expression became startled. He was one of King Richard's most faithful men, and from the ruler himself, he had received directions so expressed that he knew it would not do to slight the occasion.

"I'll go to him, myself!" he promised, and closed and locked the door at once.

"I'm afraid it is too late," murmured Ilzarra, bearing the pain as well as she could.

"We must be saved!—we must!" Ariadne declared.

"It is the poison of a weed that grows in the valley," Zorana explained. "I have heard it called 'Death's Messenger,' but don't know its true name. All depends upon whether the doctor is in time."

"The queen is a fiend!" declared Ariadne.

"She is mad—mad from brooding over her own groundless suspicions."

Heavy steps sounded in the hall, and King Richard hurriedly entered. His face was pale; his manner was excited.

"What is this I hear?" he demanded, abruptly.

"We are poisoned with 'Death's Messenger'!" Zorana declared.

"How do you know?"

"It was in our food; we tasted it, but did not suspect the truth, at first. Now, we are all suffering sharp pain—"

"You shall be seen to!" the king interrupted. "Wait!"

He hurried away. Ilzarra and Ariadne were

left in acute suspense. They knew nothing about the plant indicated, or their chances of being saved. Its very name was alarming, and their own feelings appeared to testify to its correct application.

Fortunately, the delay was not great.

The king went in person for the doctor—who was a man of some ability—and was fortunate enough to find him. Both hurried to the girls' room, and the doctor was not long in deciding that Zorana's suspicion was correct.

An emetic was administered to each sufferer, and they were told to retire at once. Two female slaves were summoned to attend them, and the battle began between life and death.

King Richard went to his own room, but not to sit down. He began to pace the floor nervously, his face a picture of deep emotions.

"What next?" he groaned; "what next? The misguided woman is terribly in earnest, and I may fail to foil some one of these many attempts. She is not in her right mind; she cannot be. Oh! to what a depth she has fallen!"

Back and forth he paced excitedly.

In vain he tried to be calm and await the result of the doctor's efforts with the iron firmness for which he was noted.

He was too deeply moved to be cool.

At last he could stand the suspense no longer, and was about to leave the room, to seek information, when a knock was followed by the appearance of the doctor.

"Well?" cried the king.

"The worst is over!"

"Do you mean that they are saved?"

"In all probability, they are. Their stomachs have been duly relieved of the poisonous matter, and, though they are still afflicted with pain and great nausea, I see no reason why we need apprehend danger."

"How could it have occurred?"

"The poison was introduced to their food, by accident or design."

This was about all that the doctor had to say, but, when he was gone, the king called a slave.

"Send the cook here!" he directed.

She came—a plain, honest-looking woman, who met Richard's gaze respectfully but frankly.

"Who prepared dinner for the prisoners in Room 6?" he asked.

"I did, your Majesty."

"Who helped you?"

"My usual helpers, Orana, Lellis and Paula."

"Was no one else there?"

"No, your Majesty—only the queen."

"So Queen Augusta was there?"

"She surprised me with a visit, and was very kind, and looked to all the cooking going on."

"Were you then cooking the prisoners' food?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"That is enough; you can go."

The cook departed.

"No further proof is needed," the king muttered. "Again has Augusta tried her desperate work. Poor, mad woman! I pity more than blame her. She does not know what she is doing. But how and when will she strike next? Thank fortune, the girls do not remain here much longer. Soon they will go to the dwellings of their husbands, and their danger will be over!"

He left his apartments and went to inquire for the girls. The doctor was still with them, but he was prepared to say that all danger was past. By night both the pain and the nausea ought to be gone, and they would be as well as ever. Their escape had been narrow, however.

As Richard was again going away a slave approached and stated that Eudora Redmoor wished to see him.

He answered the call at once.

Eudora's appearance did not improve with the passage of time, and the king was really startled to see how worn, haggard and ill she looked.

"I want to ask a favor of you," she announced, with abruptness almost fierce.

"What is it?"

"Is Margera Redmoor still your prisoner?"

"Do you mean Ilzarra?" he asked, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Yes."

"She is still my prisoner."

"What is to be done with her?"

"She will marry Alaric, the centurion."

"Has she consented?"

"No; but that does not signify."

"Does it not? In Heaven's name, is it nothing that a woman wants a voice in the bestowal of her future life on a man? Do her wishes not signify?"

Fiercely the girl asked these questions, and she twined the fingers of her thin hands in and out, one among another, most nervously and excitedly.

"By our laws, a prisoner's wishes count for nothing," Richard returned, indifferently.

"Is that just?"

"To our people it is."

"I beg that you will look at this matter in its true light. If she were your sister—"

"She is not!" the king interrupted, harshly.

"But suppose she was; suppose she was a relative of yours, would you be willing to see her doomed to this life?"

"Is this all you have called me here for?" coldly inquired Richard.

Eudora sighed almost despairingly, but, after a pause, abruptly replied:

"I have a proposition to make to you. I am interested in Ilzarra, if you are not. She is young, good and noble. Life is just beginning in its full sense for her. It rests with you to say whether it shall be a life of happiness, or a horrible existence to which death would be a welcome relief."

"Surely, our good Alaric—"

"You say that monster is to have her for his wife. I say that she had better die at once. Now, I have, as I have stated, a proposition to make. I want to save her. Her life and her happiness are precious; mine are of no account. Let me be the sacrifice for her! I was never handsome, and mental misery has made me almost a wreck. I cannot hope that Alaric would willingly accept me as her substitute, but this I will say: Let me suffer for her! If Alaric will accept me, I will marry him!"

She paused, but Richard did not answer.

"There is no sacrifice which I will not make for her," Eudora firmly pursued. "If you swear to release her and return her to the civilized world, I will die or live for her as you may decide. I make no reservation. Take me, hold me as a slave or as an eternal prisoner; marry me to Alaric or to the lowest of your people; torture me as you wish—all this I will endure for her!"

It was no florid or incoherent speech. The old passion and restlessness seemed to have died out of the unhappy woman. She was calm, firm and resigned.

Richard regarded her attentively.

"Are you sure your courage would last?"

"My courage is all gone. So has hope; and when hope goes one cares not what her fate may be."

"I don't see how it can be," Richard responded. "I feel sure that Alaric would not accept any substitute for the woman he has chosen, and in no other way could you fill her place."

"In heaven's name, don't say that," cried Eudora, with sudden vehemence and alarm. "Do not decide at once. Meditate! Consider! In some way you must be able to find a way."

"Why should you suffer for her?"

"Because she has suffered for me!"

"How?"

"She has suffered for my sins; all of her troubles are due to my infamous conduct in the past. Heaven knows that I never intended to bring such a cruel fate upon her, but I am responsible for it. Let me make the atonement! Let her go, and I pledge my word that I will accept any fate to which you may doom me."

"What do we—I and my people—gain thereby? Are not both Ilzarra and yourself already ours?"

"Unhappy fact, we are! But, oh! sir, will you not listen to pity, to the voice of your better self; and spare her? See! I ask not for myself, but I cast myself at your feet and implore you to have mercy upon my sister!"

Kneeling before him she clasped her hands, while bitter tears rolled down her up-turned face.

"Mercy! mercy!" she implored, in a broken voice.

King Richard's feelings were touched; that was plain to be seen. His face was far from being composed, and he brushed his hand across his eyes with a suspicious gesture.

"Rise, stricken soul!" he answered, in a low voice. "Rise!" and he lifted her to her feet.

"Your offer and your pledge shall be remembered. I will see Alaric about the matter—that is all I can say!"

He turned abruptly away. She spoke again, but he ignored her and left the room.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE PRISONERS' STRATAGEM.

"It's a mighty mean outlook!"

"Some chance may yet occur."

"Chances ain't hangin' around loose."

"Then we must make one."

"How kin we?"

"That is just what I have been considering."

The speakers were Alkali Abe and Scatter-shot. They were in the prison room to which, by the king's order, they had first been conducted. Time was passing dimly, but all too fast; the day was rapidly approaching when, by further decree of Richard, they were to expiate the crime of having come to No-World Kingdom.

It was not an agreeable place in which to await death, but was well suited for the captors' purpose. The stone walls and heavily-barred window were so strong that they would have been foolish to try and break out, even if they had possessed means other than those at their disposal.

As it was, they had not even a pocket-knife.

"I'm in fur any racket," Abe replied, "but I don't see no chance."

"If we go," pursued Scatter-shot, "it must be through the door."

"Should say so."

"Can you see no way?"

"I allow I can't. We can't overpower no

yaller-stripe feller, fur they don't come in, an' we can't use the little foot-squar' hole whar they hand in our grub."

"We must lure them in!"

"How kin we?"

"By pretending we are ill."

"And then jump on ter 'em?"

"Yes."

"They'll be mighty green ter be fooled that way."

"Granted; but it is our only hope. Situated as we are, we can't afford to slight any chance. Imprisonment has had the effect of making me doubt that I was right in thinking pity might exist in King Richard's breast. He is the leader of criminal, violent men, and himself stained with crime. We must not lie back in hope that may be groundless; we must make an effort to escape."

"I'm with yer, by Jericho!"

The plan was fully discussed.

Neither man could find much hope in it, the chief danger seeming to be that no one could be induced to open the door.

What would it matter, in the estimation of their guards, if men destined to be hanged within a few hours were suffering with illness?

"It's one chance in a hundred," Abe observed, but we'll work it fur all it's worth!"

Night came. They retired as usual, and silence soon prevailed in the cell. A light burned upon the small table, and through the little aperture referred to by Abe as the avenue for the distribution of food, the Legion guard now and then looked in.

Shortly after midnight this guard heard unnatural sounds from the room.

One of the prisoners was groaning.

The guard gave the fact only casual attention. Probably the prisoner was having an unpleasant dream.

After awhile he heard conversation in the room, but did not attempt to listen. Very soon, however, one of the men leaped from the couch and approached the aperture. It was Scatter-shot.

"Guard," he exclaimed, "my friend is ill."

"All right," was the indifferent reply.

"But he is very bad."

"What's the trouble?"

"I don't know. He's been taken suddenly and violently."

"I'm burnin' up!" groaned Alkali Abe, from the couch. "Thar's a red-hot fire in my stum-mick, an' a pain fit ter lift the roof off my bread-basket. Reckon I've got p'ison in my food!"

By chance the Game Chicken had found the only way he could have reached the guard. Secrecy had been thrown over the illness of the two girls, but the palace servants were like other servants; they had used their own minds and formed their own conclusions.

The conclusion was in exact keeping with the facts.

Such being the case, Abe's chance choice of words made an impression upon the guard.

"I'll see about it," he promised, and hurried away.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" muttered the alleged sick man, "is it goin' ter work?"

"Have patience, and we shall soon see."

It was an anxious halt in events. Both men were prepared to fight for their lives, and only awaited the chance. Would the guard bring any one back? If so, who would it be?

"Do I groan nat'ral?" Abe asked.

"Yes; keep it up!"

The Game Chicken obeyed. The groans were certainly lugubrious enough; he twisted on the couch, and clutched the covering spasmodically.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor; the door was unlocked; the guard and another gray-and-orange-clad man appeared.

"What's up?" asked the latter.

"My friend is very ill," Scatter-shot replied.

"Or shamming. Which?"

"I only ask you to examine him, and see."

The previous speaker advanced. Both he and the guard were then in the room, and the coveted chance had come. Moving with remarkable quickness, Scatter-shot dealt one man a blow which felled him like a log, and then seized his companion. Abe leaped to the floor. The alert explorer had managed to close his hand over the guard's mouth, and hope seemed to flash up.

The stricken man lay motionless.

"We've got 'em!" Abe whispered, as he gave assistance to overcome the Legionite.

Scatter-shot was of the same opinion, but their hopes were of short life. Suspicious sounds were heard by the door, and, as they turned, half a dozen men in gray-and-orange rushed into the room.

They flung themselves upon Scatter-shot and Abe.

"Fight!" uttered the latter; "it's our last chance!"

The order was obeyed as well as possible, and that meant a good deal with two such men, but the fallen warrior arose and the odds were eight to two.

Beset at every point the gallant pair made a long and determined struggle, but, at last, bruised and exhausted, they were flung upon the bed.

"Bind them!" was the command, and it was

obeyed. "There!" the speaker added, "I reckon we shall have no more trouble with you. Your game was a good one, but it didn't work; I suspected you from the first. You can see the result. After this you stay tied up, and you can bet you are on your last legs!"

"Yes," stubbornly replied the Game Chicken, "but we'll live ter see you on yer 'last' back!"

The defiant retort went unheeded; the warriors left the room and locked the door.

"What be we now?" Abe inquired, mournfully.

"At the disposal of King Richard," Scatter-shot answered.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ALARIC BECOMES A MARRIED MAN.

EUDORA REDMOOR had one friend who did not desert her. This was the middle-aged slave, Josephine, who acted as her maid. Josephine was supposed to be proof against any sentimental feeling, and not only had her attachment to Eudora been undetected, but no one had doubted her loyalty to the Hermit People.

But Josephine grew all the more earnest as the crisis in events approached, and she was around in the palace, using her eyes and ears a good deal the next day.

That day was one of vital importance to some of those interested, for, according to King Richard's decree, the male prisoners were to die upon the day following.

When a woman sets out to learn facts and secrets, she usually succeeds. Josephine succeeded. She came to Eudora in the afternoon, and her expression indicated that something of importance was on her mind.

"Well?" questioned Eudora, eagerly.

"I have news."

"What is it?"

"Alaric and the queen have had their heads together again."

"Tell me all, quickly!"

"The centurion will again try to marry Ilzarra to-night!"

"Merciful heavens!" gasped Eudora.

"I'm worried," Josephine added. "How dare Alaric keep on at this work? The poor queen has been so consumed by her jealousy that she isn't more than half responsible for what she does, but Alaric—I can't see how he dares fly against King Richard's will, unless it's in his heart to cast off all allegiance, and lead a rebellion against the king."

Eudora did not heed these remarks.

"We must foil him!" she declared.

"How can we?"

"Who told you of the plot?"

"That 'smart' maid of the queen's, Drusilla. Said she: 'Oh! I know a secret you would just give a gold-mine to know, but I won't tell it! Poor fool! she did not know that an old head is as cute as a young one is soft. In five minutes I had the smart young lady's brains spread out in my hand—they barely made a grease-spot—and her secret with them. She, keep a secret I want to know? Hardly!'"

"Come to the point!"

"I will. The queen and Alaric have plotted; Drusilla overheard them; I have pumped her dry."

"We must foil them."

"I'll help—but how?"

"Alaric must marry, not Margera, but me!"

"So you still stick to that idea?"

"I do."

"I shall not object further."

"It would be in vain; I must expiate my sin."

"Well, the way may be open. The plan is to send a slave to the room where Ilzarra and the other female captives are, and tell her the king wants to see her. She will be led, instead, to the audience-room, where she will be married."

"Where I shall be married; I must go in her place. But how can we arrange it?"

It was not an easy question to settle, for certain things were in the way of success, but, later in the day, Josephine learned something which simplified the matter a little. Only the queen and two slaves were to be present, besides the contracting parties and the priest; and the audience room was to be lighted only enough to dispel the darkness a fraction.

This had been decided upon for fear a bright light would bring the king's supporters down upon them.

To Eudora it promised something; if she could get to the room of sacrifice as Margera's substitute, she might go through the ceremony without being detected.

Fate continued to play into their hands. Alaric did not want to bring any of the Legion into the palace, for he had a suspicion that the king might be on the alert, and have spies at hand; so they decided to use only female slaves.

Here came the luckiest stroke of all. Some woman was wanted who had muscular strength enough to manage the prisoner, and attention was at once centered upon Josephine.

She was called to the queen's apartments and skillfully sounded. She proved her claim to the possession of an acute mind by answering with

great tact. The result was that she was enlisted for the venture.

When she bore this news to Eudora, she prefaced it with the remark:

"The battle is won!"

Shortly before midnight the chosen party gathered in the audience-room. The queen was flushed and excited, but unlike Alaric and the priest, free from nervousness. The two latter knew that in these repeated defiance of the king's will they were running great risk, but the centurion was reckless, and his money had won over the priest.

When all was ready, Alaric turned to Josephine.

"Go, now! Tell her that the king has sent for her, and see that your manner betrays nothing. If you meet any one in the corridor, pass quickly."

"I will, and I'll veil the bride, too," replied Josephine, calmly.

She went away.

The rest of the party waited anxiously.

After a few minutes two female forms entered the room. One was Josephine. The other was veiled, but Alaric thought that he recognized Ilzarra's form and general appearance. He did not for a moment suspect any double-dealing, and mentally commended the slave's prudence in using the veil.

The bride walked slowly, feebly, and with an air which might be described as "vague."

"The poison, still working, I think," Josephine whispered to Alaric, as they came up. "She appears to be dazed."

"All the better!" muttered the centurion.

He reached up to remove the veil, but quick-witted Josephine again frustrated him. She slid the bride's hand into his, and he was so well satisfied with the gift that he forgot all about the veil.

"Go on!" he directed, nodding to the priest, and feeling savage triumph in the supposed fact that the bride was so under the influence of a drug that she did not realize what she was doing.

The priest obeyed.

The marriage ceremony was not unlike that of the outside world. It required responses from the bride.

Would she answer, and answer correctly?

This was a great question in Alaric's mind.

The first question came.

All listened breathlessly.

Faintly, huskily, like the voice of one far away, came a monosyllabic response. Alaric was overjoyed. She had replied as he wished, and his evil hopes rose still higher. He muttered a blessing upon the drug which he supposed still ensnared her mind.

The farce went on: the priest pronounced the two "man and wife," and the ceremony was complete. By the laws of No-World Kingdom the centurion was bound to the woman he had taken, and could have no other wife, while she lived.

He turned to her triumphantly, and again the veil attracted his attention. He plucked it off.

The moment that he did so he started, and then wheeled and turned the light up higher.

The result almost petrified him and the queen.

There stood, not Ilzarra in a stupefied mood, but Eudora, calm and alert.

The sacrifice was complete!

It was long before the silence was broken. Alaric and the queen looked in unbelieving surprise and dismay. The expression on each face was a study fit for a painter's skill. The blow had gone home, and gone deep. But at last the centurion found the power of speech.

"Death and destruction!" he gasped, "what does this mean?"

"It means that you are foiled!" Eudora steadily replied. "I am only a woman, but I have fooled you, your queen, the priest, and this stupid slave."

She made a gesture toward Josephine, whom she was resolved to protect at all hazards, and went on:

"You have wanted a wife, my lord. You have one now. If you feel aggrieved because you have married in error, think how a certain other woman would have felt had she married you under compulsion. Think, and forget your disappointment."

"Duped, by the fiends!" hoarsely cried Alaric.

"Who has dared do this?" Augusta shrilly asked.

"I!" Eudora briefly replied.

"By my life, you shall die for it!"

"Then King Richard will know of it."

"Richard! Ha! I see—he planned this!"

"It is false. He knew not of it."

"He planned it!" almost shrieked the queen; "planned it so that he could have Ilzarra!"

"You wrong him."

"Liars! liars! You have all conspired to kill me!" and with these wild words the queen sunk back unconscious.

Alaric's face was the picture of fury.

"Woman!" he hissed, "you and your vile companions have baffled me, but you shall not live to enjoy your triumph. I swore that I would have victory or destruction, to-night, and

will keep my word. I'll have Ilzarra yet, and all the other prisoners shall die. You shall be the first!"

He plucked a knife, from his robe, and, his eyes gleaming with fury sprung toward her.

The female servants shrieked with fear and fled. Eudora followed. Her sacrifice would have been made in vain if she were dead, and she had more than love of life to think of. She fled, and Alaric pursued her in maddened fury.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TREASURE.

AT almost any other moment in her life Eudora would have swooned in fear when menaced by such danger. The steps of the enraged centurion echoed close behind her, and, once, when she looked around, the expression on his face startled her. It told a story of what was in his mind as plainly as the knife did.

Imminent as the peril was, Eudora did not faint. The idea remained strong in her mind that if she lost her life Alaric would be as free as ever to persecute Ilzarra—that life, worthless as she thought it, had suddenly become valuable.

"I'll have you yet!" Alaric asserted, with unreasoning anger. "Your life shall pay the forfeit for your smart trick!"

It was no empty threat. No person was at hand to protect her, and the centurion's speed was so great that she began to despair of regaining her room.

"You are mine!" the pursuer cried, triumphantly, and reached out his free hand to seize her flowing hair.

Just then, however, a figure shot out of the recess formed by a doorway, and its heavy weight was precipitated upon Alaric. The latter experienced a sensation as if he had collided with a locomotive, his knife went flying away, and, having no time to make the least effort to keep his feet, he went down heavily on the floor.

When he recovered sufficiently to look up, he saw an animal standing over him which appeared fierce enough to be a tiger, but, really, was a dog.

It was Lazarus.

The dog had obeyed some unknown instinct in attacking the centurion, for he never had been taught to regard Eudora highly, but he was all in earnest, and inclined to carry things to an extreme.

He stood over Alaric belligerently, his open jaws so close to the latter's throat that even the stern leader of the Legion was alarmed.

Eudora had paused half-unconsciously, and Alaric called to her.

"Order the dog away!" he directed.

"The dog seems well enough."

She answered coolly. Her courage had returned, and she already was meditating new schemes of daring.

"He will tear me to pieces."

"Let him do it!"

"See here, girl, your life depends upon your prudence. I recognize this accursed brute as a dog which follows Alkali Abe and his friends. Such being the case, it may be said he is your dog, too. If harm comes to me you will be held responsible, and duly punished."

"You threaten in vain."

"Curse you! call off the dog!" cried Alaric, in sudden, fresh alarm, as Lazarus's jaws moved a little nearer the centurion's throat.

"I shall not interfere. If he wants to close his teeth on your neck, let him do it."

Eudora spoke with cold indifference. She moved forward, however, and picked up the fallen knife. By some chance she, Alaric and Lazarus had the hall to themselves. All the slaves had fled before the warrior's rush with the knife. They did not seem inclined to return, and those who knew nothing of the recent events were otherwise engaged.

The girl came to the fallen man's side.

"Alaric, I am going to call the dog off."

"Do it and I will never forget it."

She smiled sarcastically.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simply that I never forget a good deed. Those who help me can name their reward. I was hasty a little while ago, but I see my folly now. Release me and I'll use you well, stand by you, help you."

"You promise too much."

"What do you want?"

"Not your willing aid, for that you would never give. Don't think to deceive me, sir; I can read the treachery that is in your heart, and you will not have a chance to deceive me. You will aid me, though. I am going to call the dog off, and have you release the prisoners. Don't think, sir, that you can work your will when you are once on your feet. If you attempt hostility, or try to escape, I will set the dog upon you, and he only needs my word to tear you to pieces. Keep that in mind!"

Alaric regarded her blankly.

"You are mad!" he exclaimed.

"Nevertheless, you will obey."

"Have you counted the cost?"

"What may that be, wise sir?"

"Destruction to you. How can you expect to accomplish such a deed in the very stronghold of the Hermit People?"

"I am not going to argue the point, but I say

that you are doomed if you resist; the dog will kill you. Hence, you will obey. Lazarus, come off!"

The dog regarded her doubtfully, as if appealing from the order. He had a fixed opinion in regard to Alaric, and did not like to be overruled. A second order, however, accomplished the desired result; he quitted his position reluctantly.

The centurion rose.

"Be prudent!" Eudora cautioned. "You only have to look at the dog to see that he is longing to leap upon you. He will have the chance if you are rash. Walk in the direction I indicate!"

Alaric's face was flushed. His mortification was keen. It was an ignoble state of affairs when the leader of the Kingdom's warriors was thus humbled in the palace by a woman and a dog, and it touched his pride deeply.

As far as the danger was concerned he would have defied Eudora's threat and called for help, but to summon aid was to reveal his humiliation to the ordinary people, and that would be a fresh blow.

He determined to go with the current of events for awhile, and trust to luck that he would be able to reverse the relative positions of himself and his female captor, later.

The singular procession started. Alaric, guided by Eudora's orders, led the way, and the girl and Lazarus came after. When they paused it was before the room where Scatter-shot and Alkali Abe were confined, and the plan became plain.

The guard who had stood by the door previously was no longer there; only the heavy fastenings kept the prisoners in. This state of affairs surprised no one so much as the centurion, for, if the guard had left his post voluntarily, it was a serious breach of discipline.

"Open the door!" Eudora ordered.

"How can I?"

"You have the key."

"Wrong; I have it not, and never did have."

"Where is the guard?"

"I don't know. Perhaps King Richard has taken him away. If not, the guard is likely to get a start toward another world when the king learns of it."

"Who keeps the keys?"

"They were formerly kept by an officer of our Majesty, but I think Richard has now taken charge of them, himself."

"Is this true?"

"Yes."

There was an air of sincerity in Alaric's manner which impressed Eudora strongly. Her hopes fell. What advantage was to be derived from the centurion's presence, if he had no more control over bolts and bars than the dog which stood between them?

"I want you to open that door!" she declared.

Alaric shrugged his shoulders.

"Show me a way," he answered.

"You must know of one."

"I do, and one, only. Go to the king."

The speaker's face expressed malicious pleasure. He was revenged, in part, when she was not able to profit by her victory. She stood in doubt and troubled uncertainty, but the opening of the sliding panel near the door created a diversion.

Alkali Abe's face appeared at the aperture.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, "what's this? A scamp-meetin', by glory! A game o' keards, an' knaves is trumps. Jes' so, b' mighty!"

"Abe," Eudora cried, "do you know a way out?"

"Fur honest folks, no; fur traitors, yes."

"This man is my prisoner. I have compelled him to obey me, but when I would use the keys, they are not to be found. What can you suggest?"

"You hev got him prisoner?" questioned the Game Chicken, unbelievably.

Eudora pointed to Lazarus.

"Look, and see the hero of the hour!"

Abe's face brightened.

"Jabberin' jaguars! the dog is thar! Wal, I'm glad ter see one friend on the safe side o' the bars. Say, is Lazarus givin' yo his help ter corral this yaller man?"

"Yes."

"Brayvo fur Lazi! Whoop! the dog is the same ol' true-blue. D'ye hear it, Scatter-shot?"

The Game Chicken was delighted to hear of his favorite's prowess, but Scatter-shot, who took his place as the veteran turned, had matters of more importance on his mind.

"Eudora, are you sincere?" he asked.

"I am; I swear it!"

"Help us out, and you make friends for life."

"How can I do it?"

"At least, you may be able to rescue the other prisoners. How is it?"

"All are locked in like you; I have no keys, and they are in the hands of unknown persons."

Scatter-shot looked at Alaric.

"I don't know where they are," the centurion asserted. "You will have to go to the king."

The situation was annoying to an extreme. Victory was almost in their grasp, yet wholly beyond their reach; the locks were too strong to be forced by any ordinary means.

Alaric stood by in unconcerned attention. The dog might tear him to pieces, but he felt sure the captives would not be able to escape.

"Isn't there anything with which we can batter down the door?" Scatter-shot asked.

"I know of nothing," Eudora answered.

"And you, sir?" the prisoner added, addressing the centurion sharply.

"I know of nothing."

"Perhaps. Still, I don't trust you. It is ten to one that you know where the keys are."

"I know nothing of the kind. King Richard is a man with a will of his own, and he has taken all that into his own hands. You may as well know that, and look for other means of escape, if you can devise any."

"Jabberin' jaguars! I reckon we'll hev ter wait fur an 'arthquake ter shake the lock open!" muttered Alkali Abe, disconsolately.

"I will seek other aid," Eudora declared, suddenly. "I leave you for now, but you shall hear from me again unless I am killed by these wretches. Alaric, go on, but remember that the dog is watching you. At the least sign of resistance on your part I'll launch him upon you!"

The centurion was in a furious mood. This woman had hoodwinked him, and led him on to an unwelcome marriage which, according to the laws of No-World Kingdom, destroyed all hope of his being able to possess Ilzarra while Eudora lived.

Now, he was forced to obey her like a slave—he who was the leader of the orange-barred Legion.

"Go on!" Eudora added.

Lazarus turned his gaze upon the man hungrily. Plots might be formed, consummated or ruined, but Lazarus did not change his ruling idea. He wanted leave to attack Alaric, and wanted such leave badly.

The man returned the glance, and it needed only a moment for him to decide in the matter.

He turned and walked where his captor directed.

Eudora had a definite idea in view, and it was to ask for Josephine's assistance. The slave knew the palace and its system well enough so that her advice would be invaluable, and the crisis was excuse enough for letting the Legionite know she had been in the former plot against him.

Alaric's fury increased, but the dog that paced behind him never wavered; the man went meekly, as far as appearances were concerned, until Josephine's room was reached.

She happened to open the door just then, and stood surprised at the scene before her.

Eudora proceeded to explain in a few words enough to make the situation clear.

"Where are the keys?" she added.

Josephine looked half-fearfully at Alaric.

"I think he knows."

"He denies it."

"What is his word worth? He is a villain and a coward! There has been some new arrangement about the keys. If he don't know, he surely knows how to find out where they are."

"That will be remembered against you, slave!" the Legionite declared, harshly. "Say all you will; the account-book shall be opened by-and-by."

Eudora was in a state of great uncertainty. She knew that vigorous action would not make her cause any more hopeless, but how was it to be directed the most intelligently?

While she stood meditating upon this point the floor seemed to swim under her feet, and the walls of the palace rocked. All there were nearly thrown from their feet.

"The earthquake!" Josephine exclaimed.

A mocking laugh came from Alaric.

"Look at your gallant defender!" he directed.

He pointed down the corridor, and Eudora saw Lazarus fleeing in terror. The brave animal feared no living foe, but the convulsion of nature was too much for his endurance.

The Legionite glanced at the knife in the girl's hand.

"Farewell!" he added. "I'll see you later."

And he walked rapidly down the corridor.

Eudora watched him go in the silence of despair. Without the dog's aid she could not control her enemy, and he was free to do as he wished.

His actions were prompt and to the point. He did not know what had become of Queen Augusta, and cared less, but he had resolved not to waste any more time. With rapid steps he made his way to the lower part of the building, and there, as he had expected, he found several of the orange-barred troop. He lost no time in addressing them.

"Men, I have kept you waiting, but I hope your courage has not wavered. How is it?"

"We are still of our old opinion," answered one.

"Then we will act at once. The misfortunes which I foresaw might occur have occurred, and the extreme measures I thought possible must be tried. Are you all with me?"

"Yes," they answered, in chorus.

"You will aid me to force open the prison doors, slay such of the captives as we wish, and take the others away?"

"We will."

"And you are ready to desert No-World Kingdom and seek a new home, to the exclusion of the rest of the Legion?"

"If we can have the treasure," answered a big Legionite, quickly.

"You shall have it. I know how to get the keys of the vault, and will do it at once. While the rest of us are working above, you two"—he indicated the men he referred to—"shall visit the vaults. Take out the treasure and put it in bags, but wait below until I come to you. I have an idea that fresh earthquake shocks are coming. This building may go down in a mere ruin, but, be that as it may, we will be far away with the treasure. Wait here, all of you, until I return with the keys to the vaults."

He hastened away, but had gone only a few yards when he saw Eudora and Josephine. Their manner was so suggestive of the possibility that they had been spying upon him, that his anger flamed up against them afresh.

He had armed himself with another knife, and he drew it quickly and started toward them.

If they were designing they were prudent, also, and they stayed for no words. Fleeing at once, he failed to overtake them until the sharp closing of the doors to their rooms showed that they were safe from his anger.

He abandoned the attempt and went on more moderately.

After he left the Legionites, one of the two whom he had selected to go to the vaults drew his comrade aside.

"If one is a traitor," he said, "why not be a traitor in the full sense of the word?"

"What mean you?"

"If we are to steal the treasure, why not have it all?"

"Speak plainly."

"Why should we wait in the vaults and share with Alaric and the others? Let us be rich, very rich! Why not take the treasure at once, you and I, and, since we are to leave here, anyhow, make a grand stroke?"

The second man's eyes glittered.

"Can it be done?"

"If we are bold—yes!"

"Then count on me. I am with you!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE.

THE palace shook from foundation to roof. At the first it was only a tremor, which gave those who were upon their feet a feeling of giddiness, but, like an ocean wave, a second tremor followed the first, and the whole building rattled. The walls cracked, exposing rents therein, and the edifice seemed to be in a convulsion.

Those who were asleep awoke.

They awoke in terror.

The old inhabitants of No-World Kingdom had looked with a feeling approaching indifference upon the previous shock, for slight tremors of the earth were nothing new to them, but this was very different.

The violence of the vibration was evidence of danger which no one could doubt.

Men and women were at once thrown into a panic. They sprung up and groped in the darkness for their clothing, anxious to get away. The earthquake gave them a few moments of respite. Then they began to appear in the corridors. They were just in time for a fresh alarm.

Again came the dread rumbling and tremor, and the walls creaked and tottered as though about to fall. Many persons were thrown prostrate. When they arose, the greater part made all haste to reach the open air.

Once there, it was seen that the alarm was general. The streets were dotted with those who had come from other dwellings, and still others were hurrying out. On every face was an expression of terror, and it was the general opinion that the town was to be destroyed as the old city had been, hundreds of years before.

The prisoners in the cells did not flee; they had no chance to go. The doors were locked upon them, and the big stone building might tremble, creak, or fall—they could only await what might come.

This was the situation of Alkali Abe and Scatter-shot.

"Jabberin' jaguars!" the veteran exclaimed, "I never reckoned on bein' wiped out this way, an' I can't say I like it."

"We are not gone yet," Scatter-shot answered.

"Ef the shanty shakes down, whar will we be?"

"It has not come down yet. I suspect that the harder it shakes, the better our chances. If they dare to open our door we will fight our way—"

Abe grasped his friend's arm.

"Hark!" he uttered.

A key had clicked in the lock. Both men stood with bated breath. They had been released from the bonds put upon them after their former attempt at escape, and were ready to try it again.

But their hopes were dashed to ruin when the door opened. They saw five men of the Legion, all armed with rifles, with Alaric beside them. The centurion's face was white, and his eyes gleamed wildly.

He pointed to Abe and Scatter-shot, and hoarsely ordered:

"Fire at once!"

The rifles came up; the muzzles bore upon the prisoners; the locks clicked, and another moment would have seen the culmination of a tragedy.

But it was interrupted.

"Stop!" thundered a commanding voice behind the riflemen.

Their rifles fell; they recognized the voice, and obeyed it as the dog does its master. King Richard roughly pushed his way into the room, and other men in the gray-and-orange followed. The ruler's expression was severe, but calm. He pointed to Alaric.

"Put that villain under arrest!" he commanded.

The centurion started, as from a nightmare, and drew a knife.

"Never!" he cried, fiercely.

There was murder in his heart, and he glared vindictively at the king, but the latter, who carried a drawn sword, struck out so quickly and surely that Alaric was felled by a blow from the side of the weapon. Before he could rise, the Legionites, who were true to the king, had bound the rebellious officer.

Then again came the throes of the earth. There was a rumbling sound, a tremor which swelled louder and louder, and the palace-walls reeled and cracked. It was a marked commentary on the weakness of men that all there were flung to the floor. They could not rise until the shock had somewhat subsided.

King Richard was first on his feet.

"Open every prison-door, and let the occupants go free!" he ordered. "The town is doomed!"

Then he hastened to Scatter-shot's side.

"Collect your party, one and all, and get away," he added. "The rebellion is crushed by Alaric's down fall, and no one will molest you; all will be thinking of their own safety. Appropriate horses, at once, and hasten away from this accursed place as soon as possible. Go!"

He next turned to his men and directed them to leave the room. Alaric was taken out in almost-frenzied rage.

Abe and Scatter-shot had a clear field, and they did not fail to improve it. When they reached the corridor the Legionites were already unlocking the other doors, and the prisoners came out. Scatter-shot and Ilzarra paused for one embrace, and then all attention was given to getting the whole party together.

This was done. It consisted of Abe, Scatter-shot, Ludlow, Silent Seth, Yorick, Ilzarra, Ariadne, Eudora, Zorana and Josephine.

The latter two had determined to follow the fortunes of those to whom they had become attached.

Eudora was far from being apathetic as one who had lost all interest in life should be. When Alaric pursued her and Josephine with the knife they barely managed to reach Eudora's room and lock themselves in, in time to foil the enraged centurion.

Fear of him had not disappeared.

They were about to leave the corridor when a new figure approached. It was that of Allison Blake. He was not only a badly-frightened man, but his general appearance indicated hard usage. He ran toward them with a mixture of eagerness and doubt.

"Save me! save me!" he implored, with pitiable distress.

"Save yourself!" Alkali Abe growled.

"But let me go away with you."

"Yes, yes! you would be a pretty viper ter take in. I ain't forgot how you implored the king ter let ye decoy me hyar, an' how ye did it. You double-dyed traitor! we don't want yer!"

"But I have repented—"

"Yer place is with our enemies. Go ter them!"

"But I am afraid of them; the king is my worst enemy. He laid a trap for me, that night, and it was he who used me so severely."

"Sarved yer right! So he pretended ter fall in with your decoy game, an' then made you the sufferer! Bully fur him!"

"What have I told you, Abe?" questioned Scatter-shot.

"I caved; the king ain't half a bad feller. But this ain't biz. Let's get away while we kin."

"Let me go!" again implored Blake.

"I forbid it!" exclaimed Eudora. "I have been all that was vile and evil, as I am glad to confess; but not one step would I ever have taken had it not been for that wretch. He planned the abduction of Margera, to separate her and Howell Lorme; and lured me on with devilish ingenuity until I consented to help him. He has been the evil genius of your lives. Even when he came to these hills, it was, I am sure, to seize Margera again."

"Your affidavit is welcome, but not needed," replied Abe; "we know him, wal. Skip, A. Blake; skip! We won't hev ye in our fold!"

Before more could be said the earth shook again, and, at the first vibration, Blake uttered a wild cry and rushed away.

"Foller me!" Abe ordered again.

There was no hesitation. One and all followed,

and they hastened out of the palace. Its tremors did not cease. One shock followed another, and, though they were not severe, they were enough to alarm the stoutest-hearted of the party.

When the outer air was reached they found nearly all the people in the street, rustling blindly, frantically about. Orange-barred Legionites were there, but, as in the case of a prairie fire, the common peril put sanguinary thoughts out of the worst hearts.

No one molested them.

They hastened through the crowd, moving straight toward the hills.

A pause was made before reaching them. Scatter-shot was wise enough to see that the valley was the safest of all places at that crisis. Among the rocks, the same as in a building, they would be liable to be crushed by snifting, falling objects.

Abe admitted the wisdom of the suggestion, and they halted where neither rock nor tree menaced them.

They were none too soon.

Nature had sent forth her warning, and now rallied for sterner work. Fresh shocks came, but not the petty ones of the previous hour. An ignorant mind might well have supposed that the end of the world was coming, for the earth shook to a remarkable degree. The fugitives did not attempt to stand, but crouched on the ground. They knew that the houses of No-World Kingdom were crumbling; they could hear walls and roofs falling in.

Then came the climax.

A tremendous shock followed, and Scatter-shot, who had been watching the palace, saw it go down like a toy house. And it went to the accompaniment of a crash and boom which seemed to be the final thunder of destruction to a doomed world.

The very mountains seemed to split asunder, and the rocks and cliffs to be footballs for the mighty power that moved them. And when that great throes subsided, destruction and desolation reigned all around.

CHAPTER XL.

THE CRUMBLING KINGDOM.

RICHARD was no sooner rid of Scatter-shot and his party than he turned his thoughts to other subjects. He had spoken his mind truthfully when he advanced the theory that the town was ruined. Long experience enabled him to judge the earthquake shocks like an expert; he saw that the present disturbance was far more serious than any of past days, and he weighed it accordingly.

"Would to Heaven I could be with the girl and her friends now," he muttered, "but what could I do? What would my puny efforts amount to when Nature rules the hour? King I may be of a miserable valley and an evil people, but there is a King whose awful Majesty and whose power makes my feeble strength sink into nothingness. They may as well go alone; I am a mere weakling. Poor Ilzarra!"

He stood in melancholy meditation. The walls of his palace gaped around him in crevices made by the previous shock, but he cared not for them.

To him the destruction of the building was a trivial matter in comparison with the welfare of Ilzarra.

"Heaven grant she may escape!"

He stood like one in a dream until one of his most faithful followers advanced and saluted him with marked respect.

"Have you any orders, King Richard?" he asked.

"Orders!" Richard echoed, blankly.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"What orders should I have?"

"Ought not something to be done in this crisis?"

The practical question of the faithful follower aroused the king from his gloomy, absent-minded mood.

In a moment he became the resolute master of old.

"Ay," he replied, firmly; "something must be done. The town is doomed, but our people still live. We must save something from the wreck. If we remain here, we and all our possessions will go to ruin with the collapse of these walls. The Hermit People must live, despite the ruin of their habitations. How of our men?"

"They await your orders, your Majesty."

"They have not fled?"

"Not to any extent."

"Summon a dozen of the most faithful."

The Legionite hastened away.

"There is yet hope," Richard remarked. "Crime-stained as these men are they remember the discipline of old. I suppose the pirates and outlaws famous in history had the same hold upon their followers."

A brief, bitter smile appeared upon his face. This man spared himself nothing; he knew his errors and his offenses, and never tried to palliate them.

The orange-clad warriors soon came. Their composure in that hour was remarkable.

"Men," spoke the king, in the old, magnetic voice, "this hour is to prove your loyalty to sovereign and country."

"You have only to command us, your Majesty," replied one of the group, quickly.
 "My command is that we save the treasure."
 "Tell us how, King Richard."
 "Follow me!"

He led the way to the lower floor of the palace. There the workmen of the Hermit People had done their most skillful work, and the result did not fall far short of rivaling the vaults of more noted storage-places for treasure.

The king finally paused before a massive iron-door which was secured with suitable locks.

"Open!" he directed, thrusting his hand into the folds of his robe.

"Yes; open and divide the treasure!" cried another voice, in a key of unnatural pitch.

The king turned quickly—Queen Augusta and Allison Blake stood before him.

The two had followed the party to the vaults. Richard's eyes flashed as he saw Blake, but softened again as his gaze was turned upon Augusta. It required only one glance for him to discover that her mental state was even worse than before. There was little of sanity in it; there was much that was wild and without method.

"What do you here?" he asked, gently.

"We have come to get our share of the treasure," Augusta answered. "Divide it at once!"

"It will not be divided."

"So! Do you think to retain it all?"

"The Hermit People will retain it, and retain it, too, intact and collectively."

"Our race is doomed."

"Not so. We may not exist here, but we shall do so elsewhere. We will begin a new life."

"You think to deceive me!" Augusta cried, wildly, "but it will not work. I know you, King Richard; you think you can get away with the diamonds, marry a younger and fairer woman, and leave me a beggar. Infamous wretch! your scheme will not work!"

"Augusta," was the patient reply, "you wrong me and yourself. Your views are wholly incorrect. I swear to you that your every suspicion is wrong. I have no thought of any one but you, and I sincerely trust that we may share each other's lot for a long time to come, and be to one another as we were in the past."

"Hear Judas talk!" exclaimed Augusta, bitterly.

"You name him well!" declared Blake.

"So you are there!" pronounced Richard, bitterly.

"I am here," Allison doggedly answered, "and as this lady's champion."

"She needs none; least of all, not such a wretch as you!"

"You seek to trample on her rights."

"Liar!"

"I repeat it," declared Blake, with reckless persistency.

"And you intend to right her wrongs?"

"I do."

Richard smiled sarcastically.

"You are a fine subject for a champion; a more contemptible specimen it would be hard to find. There is not one noble or even respectable element in your nature, and you have acted the Judas of whom you speak, in a perfect way. Attend to your own affairs, sir."

"Will you hear nothing from me?" Augusta asked, excitedly.

"From you, much; from yonder dog, nothing."

"Beware what epithets you apply to me!" retorted Blake.

"What would you do?"

"Have my revenge."

"Take it now!"

Richard's manner continued calm, but there was evidence of the deep feeling that stirred within him. He laid a hand on Allison's arm, and the challenge was not declined.

Blake struck out like a veritable pugilist, but not with corresponding effect. The blow was parried, and a skillful return felled the villain at the king's feet. Then the latter planted his foot on Blake's breast.

"If you had your just deserts," he added, "your miserable career would end without delay."

The prostrate man did not answer. The blow had half stunned him, and swept away all of the reckless audacity which had led him to dare the king.

Augusta began to wring her hands and weep hysterically.

"I am robbed of my last friend!" she declared.

Richard went to her quickly.

"Unfortunate woman," he answered, with pity, "I pray that you may see this matter as it is. Turn not your thoughts upon false advocates and mistaken measures. Know that I am as much your true friend as ever. Trust in me; your husband trust me, and all shall be well."

He would have touched her caressingly, but she repulsed him with wild vehemence.

"Away, Judas!" she cried. "Never speak to me again—never look at me. I know you as you are; time has laid bare all your perfidy. Get away from me! Go to the one you love, if she is so fair and charming. All I ask is my share of the treasure. I demand that, and will have

it. You can only foil my just attempt by killing me. Do that if you wish; perhaps it will save me from killing you."

The unnatural light in her eyes was increasing, and Richard sighed deeply as he realized how seriously her reason was impaired. While he stood in irresolution the earth began to shake again.

He turned quickly to his men.

"Open the vault!" he ordered.

They started to obey, but the first lock touched dropped to the floor. It had been closed, but not fastened.

"What is this?" the king demanded.

With his own hands he tried the other locks, and in each case with the same result. The evidence that the vault was fastened was but a hollow mockery.

He flung open the door.

The vault was empty.

Exclamations of surprise came from the Legionites, but Richard was not surprised.

"The treasury has been robbed!" he exclaimed. "Some one has had the keys before us, and taken away all of the Hermit People's belongings!"

"It was the men led by Alkali Abe," suggested a dumfounded follower.

"Not so; that party has had no knowledge of our treasure, and more weighty matters have been on their minds. Besides, they could not gain access to the vaults."

"By my faith!" cried one of the Legionites, "I now remember seeing two men in orange loading bags upon their horses by the rear door an hour ago. They then rode away toward the west."

"Our own men have robbed us," answered Richard, in a hard voice. "There were traitors even in our trusted party, and this is the result. They have beggared the band, but they may not get clear so easily. We will pursue. The earth is not wide enough to hide them. We—"

He paused as a shock came, severer than those before, and the palace trembled and groaned above them until it seemed as if the whole structure was about to fall down and bury them under the crushing weight.

The leader sounded the word of retreat, and his followers were not slow to respond. They fled up the swaying stairway as rapidly as possible, keeping their feet with no small amount of trouble.

Blake followed them, staggering blindly.

Richard would have given his wife due aid, but again she repulsed him. She went alone, and several peals of wild laughter indicated that her condition was growing worse steadily.

The king reached the main floor.

There were several things he wished to do before deserting the palace, but they remained undone. The same convulsions of nature felt by Scatter-shot and his friends in the other part of the valley fell upon the Hermit People, and found them even less prepared.

The big building shook to its foundation as shock followed shock, and it was almost out of the question to keep one's feet.

Those who tried it were flung about like inanimate creatures.

Richard summoned all of his mental strength, and tried to act the king and the soldier. In a firm voice he directed all to leave the place, and, as terror had caused them to congregate, there was no necessity for passing the order along.

All heard, and all obeyed willingly.

It was a retreat of strange method, or, rather, lack of method. As they turned to depart tremor after tremor shook them about, and nauseous distress was added to their fright. They left the building, which was never again to bear the weight of a human foot in its existing shape.

Outside, the common people were in a panic even greater. They knew not what to do, and did not have courage for the simplest action in the way of self-preservation.

"People of No-World Kingdom!" cried Richard in a loud voice, as the terrestrial quavers abated for a moment, "this is no place for us to-night. It means death to stay in our city, but I will lead you where you will be safe, unless the earth opens and swallows us up bodily. Let us get away from these dangerous walls, before they kill us."

"Ask your king what he has done with the common treasure!" loudly directed Augusta.

"Ay, the treasure!" answered one of the nobility. "Where is it?"

"We have been robbed—"

"By whom?" interrupted Allison Blake, significantly, with a fresh revival of courage and malice.

"By him!" asserted the queen. "By the Judas of our race!"

And she pointed to King Richard.

"There can be no doubt of it," Blake added.

Richard turned upon the speaker with flashing eyes. At any other time the villain would have gone straight to a dungeon if he had dared to use such language, but in that crisis every one was privileged by circumstances to speak as he wished. Blake, furious because his enemies had gone free, and driven by cowardly fear of the earthquake to defiance of the

king as unnatural as it was ill-considered, had a mad idea at that moment that, if he could turn the people against their leader, he could succeed to the office.

He was near punishment at the king's own hands at that moment, but it was never meted out.

Suddenly there came the great, crowning shock of the earthquake, and every one there was flung to the ground forcibly.

But that was not all.

With that great convulsion the buildings of No-World Kingdom went to pieces like toy-houses, and none suffered worse than the palace. The walls shook and spread, the roof parted and gave way, and the whole mass, so long the pride of the Hermit People, came to the earth, a shapeless ruin.

Nor was this all. The flying blocks of stone did not all fall in, but from this and the adjacent buildings the deadly missiles descended upon the crowd, and the angel of destruction reaped a rare harvest.

For a time even the uninjured were incapable of anything approaching coherence in any form, but, as their minds cleared, they found themselves in the midst of a scene never to be forgotten.

With that great shock the violence of the outbreak passed away, and it was time if anything was to be left of the Hermit People.

As the survivors rose they found their numbers woefully lessened, and the wounded called for aid they could but partially offer.

King Richard thought of his wife first of all, and turned to where he had last seen her standing. She stood there no longer, but, stretched out on the ground, he saw a motionless figure he did not fail to recognize.

He knelt by her side.

Queen Augusta was dead!

As he made this discovery another figure appeared, writhing out of the scattered building-stones like a maimed snake. It was Allison Blake.

"Help! help!" he whispered.

Richard looked at him with cold composure.

"Whom do you ask?"

"You!—you!"

"So! What do you expect of a king who would steal his people's treasure?"

"I told a lie!" the wretch confessed, with abject utterance. "Don't lay it up against me! I was mad, mad! Oh! help me in some way. A rock fell squarely upon me."

"How low the evil-minded do fall!" commented Richard, absently.

"Bring me a surgeon at once! Bring me— Ah-h! it is too late! Too—late!"

Blake drew a deep, quivering breath, and never spoke or moved again. Death had claimed him; his evil deeds, as far as his own connection with the consequences was concerned, were all of the past.

King Richard felt pitifully weak, but a great effort enabled him to turn his mind on the survivors of his band. How soon another shock would come he did not know, and decisive action was necessary.

"Collect the wounded and follow me away," he directed. "We cannot care for the dead to-night. If we perish, too, they will be as well off as we are. Make haste!"

The last order was hardly needed. Now that the ground was quiet enough to enable them to act, all were eager to do so and leave the scene of danger.

They were soon in motion.

Richard led the way, and his manner indicated nothing but firm composure. Appearances were deceptive, however, and he would have changed his lot for that of any beggar living. Queen Augusta was dead, the town was destroyed, and the Hermit People lacked more than one member who had but recently been a strong brother. At the edge of the valley, where it connected with a smaller one to the west, the king paused and looked back.

Many years of his strange life had been passed in No-World Kingdom, and if those years had not been wholly happy, they had been those of absolute power. When Augusta had been free from the consuming jealousy which, finally, had wrecked her mind, she had not been a bad companion, and he had all of the memories of the ordinary man who leaves a ruined home.

Anon, they continued their way and reached the minor valley. As there was nothing near to overwhelm them, it seemed, as the king had said, that they were safe unless actually swallowed up by the earth.

This was a mistaken idea.

Some time before that other members of the band had traveled the same route, led by Alaric. The centurion had friends left even after the failure of his short-lived conspiracy, and they had seized the first opportunity to release him.

He had ordered them to follow him to the western valley; they had obeyed, but greatly to the subsequent regret of those who survived the next act in the drama.

The same influences which had ruined them now threatened King Richard's men.

Unseen by the latter, dark forms began to draw near, and then, with a sudden chorus of yells, men leaped from the obscure background

and attacked the already disheartened Hermit People.

The assailants were the Apaches before seen in the Kingdom, and the fresh assault had come just when the Legionites were least fit to meet it. The feeble stand they made hardly deserved the name of resistance.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE SECRET OF A MAN'S LIFE.

MORNING!

The earthquake shocks had passed, and the once-troubled sphere appeared to be as firm as ever. But the night had been one of destruction, and vast changes had occurred in and around No-World Kingdom.

Alkali Abe, Scatter-shot and the rest of the little party stood on the edge of the hills, where a cliff met the valley, looking northward. They had not obeyed King Richard's command to go away for the very good reason the terrestrial tremors had continued so long that it would have been foolish to venture among the shaking, shifting rocks, even if horses or men could keep their feet.

The present scene, gloriously bathed in sunlight, was one which made the brightness of the celestial area seem a bitter mockery.

The town was an utter ruin.

In no place could a wall be seen which was over four feet high. Buildings, large and small, had gone to pieces utterly, and, in some cases, it could not be told where they had stood—the broken fragments had been flung about so that it was all one wild disorder, not even the course of the main street being traceable.

It was thickly covered with building-stones, wood, household effects and various other things.

The palace was a heap of stones. The blocks of which it had been composed had been so heavy that they scattered less than the smaller ones of the minor buildings, but neither outer wall nor partition could be traced. It was a shapeless ruin.

But the worst of all was the fact that the one great shock had brought death to many of the doomed people, as the observers could plainly see.

Alkali Abe turned away.

"I can't be content ter go until I've been over thar, an' I'm goin'," he announced. "Wait fur me hyar!"

He turned away, but had gone only a few steps when he paused. A low canyon lay before him. Down this two men were coming, several years apart. The first reeled as he walked, and seemed near to death; the second walked boldly, strongly, and, evidently, was pursuing the first.

The leader was Alaric; the pursuer, King Richard.

Abe saw something more. In a recess stood Babel, the elephant, and Lazarus, the dog. The two had escaped the earthquake, but Babel soon gave evidence that he was in ill humor. No sooner had he caught sight of Alaric than he gave his trunk an angry sweep and started toward the centurion.

The latter saw him and tried to escape.

He was too late. It was over in a few seconds; raised in the coil of the trunk, he never stirred after he was dashed down.

"The king!" exclaimed Scatter-shot. "He will be killed! Eudora, if you possess any influence over the brute, exert it now!"

The girl sprang to the edge of the rocky wall; she called the elephant's name.

Babel seemed to have exhausted his fury, for he gave heed at once. Possibly wild life had not suited his taste, for he exhibited pleasure at hearing his mistress's voice, and came toward them.

King Richard, too, had seen them, and he put out his hand with the open palm toward them and advanced at a brisk pace.

"Let's go down!" suggested Abe. "He set us clear o' the palace, and must be all right."

They descended, and met the king near the foot of the rocks.

"I give you greeting," he said, in a deep voice. "You can meet me as man to man, for my own followers number but few more than your party."

"We reckoned the earthquake used ye rough," Abe answered.

"That was not all. What ones of us escaped the ruin fled to the Western hills, only to run into the waiting band of Apaches. They fell upon us. The result may be surmised when I say that we are nearly wiped out of existence. The ignorant savages thought we caused the shocks, as I learned from one of their dying men, and set out to be avenged in a spirit of sheer madness."

He paused, but before any one could reply, rapidly continued:

"Last night's work left me without a wife. Queen Augusta—unfortunate, insane woman that I believe she had become!—was killed by a falling building-stone. So was Allison Blake. Your enemy is dead."

"Then I judge your Kingdom is in a bad way."

"Nothing remains of it. Perhaps it is as well; it was one of infamy and violence. You may hardly believe me, but we located here to

gather a species of diamonds—one of fair value, the like of which exists, as far as I know, nowhere upon earth, at this day, except in a little valley west of the town.

"You have seen the ruined city east of the town. In the western valley there was once a smaller place, and in the sand there we found the diamonds. I believe that the old, lost race brought them from a distance, and that, in some way, they were scattered broadcast—perhaps when their city was destroyed.

"Our sojourn at No-World Kingdom was to collect them, but I think nearly all are gone—perhaps forever. Last night two traitorous men of the Legion robbed the treasury and fled on horses. They fell in with the Apaches and were killed. Either the Apaches have the diamonds now, or have thrown them away where we can't find them."

He paused, and Abe began:

"You seem ter be in hard luck—"

King Richard ignored him, and, looking steadily at Ilzarra, continued:

"During all the time you have been a prisoner, have you seen one act on my part that makes a lighter shade on the dark web of my career?"

"Indeed I have!" she answered, quickly. "I owe all to you. Time and again you stood between me and a wretched fate, and you ended by liberating us all."

"But I was the organizer and leader of the band."

"There are times when one is the victim of unjust circumstances—"

"I have no such excuse—not one. Do you know," he abruptly added, "why I have saved you? But, of course, you do not. Girl, did you ever hear of your father's wayward, hot-tempered brother, Irving Redmoor?"

"His brother! No!"

"But I have," Eudora interrupted. "Our father had a brother who ran away and was never again heard from."

"I am he!" King Richard steadily replied.

"You!"

"Even so! I am Irving Redmoor, your uncle! Now you know why I stood by you; the tie of blood touched the apology of a heart I still had. You, Eudora, I never saw, but, on my last visit to your father—I was just back from a whaling voyage—I saw Margera, Ilzarra, or whatever you may call her. I never forgot the golden-haired child of four years, and I actually learned to love her during my brief visit. It was the recollection of the old days which led me to protect her here. I tried to steel my heart; to be true to my oath to the Hermit People; but I could not. Groundless jealousy of you made my poor wife mad—a fit punishment for me. I dared not tell her the truth; always suspicious, she would not have believed me."

"You, our uncle!" murmured Eudora.

"May heaven bless you for your goodness—"

Ilzarra's tremulous speech was interrupted by the king, whose stern face did not soften.

"Pray, let us have no words of affection. I am a scoundrel unworthy of a kind thought from you. I am about to leave you. Alkali Abe, in the east part of the valley, near the old-time ruined city, you will find horses. Take them, and go at once. Flee, and beware of the Apaches!"

He turned to go, but Ilzarra sprang to his side.

"Uncle—"

"No, no!" he commanded. "Speak not that lofty word. Let the man of crime go!"

"But when shall I see you again?"

"Never!"

"I must! Promise me—"

"No! I swear you shall never see me again!" the ex-king firmly declared.

"But you will write to me!" she implored, clasping her hands.

He had turned his face away. Now he turned again and looked. Tears suddenly filled his eyes.

"Let me go!" he murmured, hoarsely; "let me pay the penalty of my crimes!"

"But promise me you will sin no more. I beseech you, by the tie of blood, promise!"

His strong face moved convulsively, but he calmed himself and replied:

"No-World Kingdom is a thing of the past; nearly all its people are dead. What few of us remain are going to pursue the Apaches, to see if we can recover the diamonds. When the chase is over I must, of necessity, begin a new career. I will not promise you what it will be, but this much I swear—If I ever feel myself a better man, and know I am an honest man, you shall hear from me. Farewell!"

As he made a motion to go the grateful girl held out her hand. He looked at it, and then at his own.

"No!" he replied, firmly. "This is a blood-stained hand; it shall not touch yours. Farewell!"

He hastened away, and was soon out of sight.

The horses were found where King Richard had said. In getting them a new discovery was made. The valley of the ruined city had disappeared utterly. The hills had moved further on; the valley was gone; and what had re-

mained of the city of the lost race was buried, as the rest had been, and still was, under a hundred feet of rock—a weight which must have crushed the old temple, its statues and its sculptured slab, into ruins.

Guided by Alkali Abe, the little party reached the places of civilization in safety. There they separated. Ludlow and Ariadne had decided to marry. The ceremony was performed at once, and they started for the East. Abe and Silent Seth, accompanied by Lazarus, returned to the hills. Yorick and Babel were engaged by a circus which happened to be at hand.

Scatter-shot and Ilzarra went to Iowa, accompanied by Eudora, Zorana and Josephine.

Eudora was fully forgiven, but she had much the same spirit as her uncle. She left them, went to Canada and, finally, married there and is happy.

For Howell Lorme and Margera, his wife, the gloomy days seem to be past. No one can boast of a happier home. Zorana and Josephine are with them. Now and then they hear from Roland and Ariadne, who are in Ohio.

Alkali Abe and Seth still range the Far West hills and valleys. Once, they tried to lead an exploring party of scientists to the ruined city, but even their skill could not re-locate it. Probably, nothing remained after the earthquake to repay investigation, if it had been found.

At the end of the year Margera received a box by Express. Within it was found a considerable number of diamonds, and with them this brief note:

"Be comforted, my niece and redeeming angel, the ex-king is of loftier rank than ever before; he is an honest man, in practice and at heart. Pray that he may know that he has Divine forgiveness!"

The little box came from California, but all attempts to learn where "King Richard" was failed. It was inferred, but not known, that the diamonds had been recovered from the Apaches.

All else is a mystery in the ex-king's life, but he has the best wishes of the young couple, and Margera did not fail to heed the final injunction of his letter.

THE END.

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